新約

とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス）

13

鎌池和馬

イラスト／はいむらきよたか

電撃文庫

New Testament
Toaru Majutsu no Index 13

Kamijou Touma is racing along.

He is trying to escape through Academy City on a high-tech bicycle known as an Acrobike. Behind him, Misaka Mikoto is clinging to his waist so she won't be thrown off.

A great darkness approaches them from behind.

That true Magic God pursues Kamijou with destructive power so overwhelming it transcends dimensions.

There is nothing Kamijou and Mikoto can do, but then an unexpected individual holds out a helping hand!

And as she fights alongside him, Mikoto's far from calm feelings about Kamijou begin to smolder in her heart.

This is Gremlin: Attack of the Magic Gods! When science and magic cross paths, the story begins!

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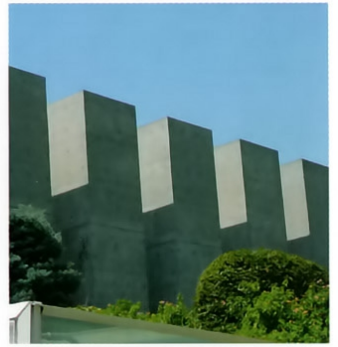

Kamachi Kazuma

Bicycles that use gyros to not fall over apparently actually exist, but they don't seem that appealing. But if there was a skateboard you could never fall off of, I'd want to try riding it. And I'd want to try it at a ridiculous location like this.

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Toaru Majutsu no Index 1~22
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The Unexplored Summon://Blood-Sign 1 & 2
The Circumstances Leading to a Certain Magical Heavy Zashiki Warashi's Simple Killer Queen's Marriage

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Illustrator: Haimura Kiyotaka

I am slowly drawing in the back country of Hiroshima.

新約 とある魔術の禁書目録（インデックス） 13

鎌池和馬
イラスト／はいむらきよたか

Arrowhead comet

This small astronomical body visited the earth once in the year 1700. Its main body is a giant snowball that includes some rocky material. The dust surrounding it looks like a tail thanks to the solar winds. Quite a few events are being held in Academy City to celebrate its visit. It is hoped the comet's rocky material will contain an unknown achondrite that does not fit in any of the six existing categories.

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"Neeephthyyys, you're really, really looking down on them."

A Magic God and a member of the true Gremlin that has attacked Academy City

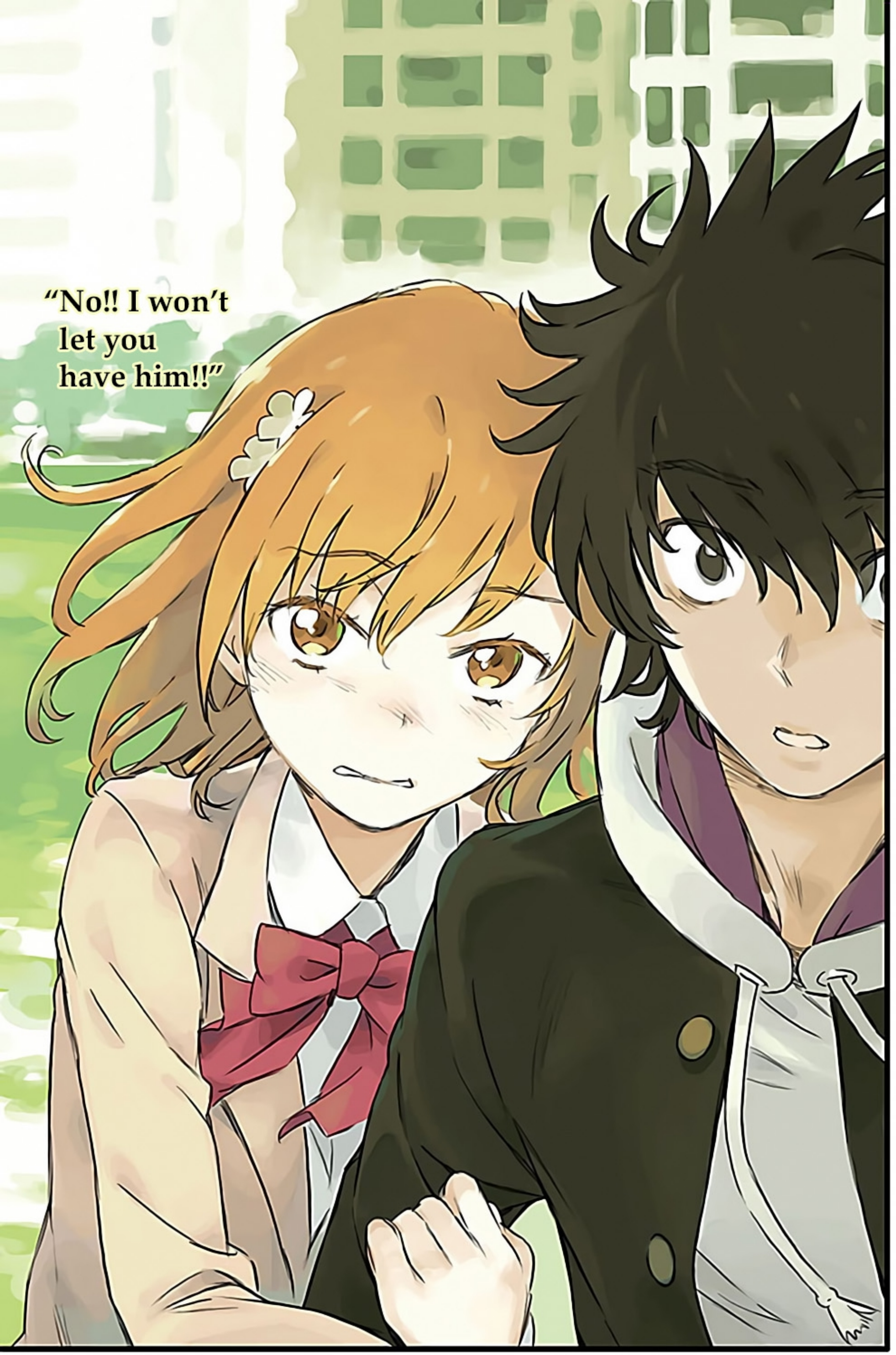
Niang-Niang

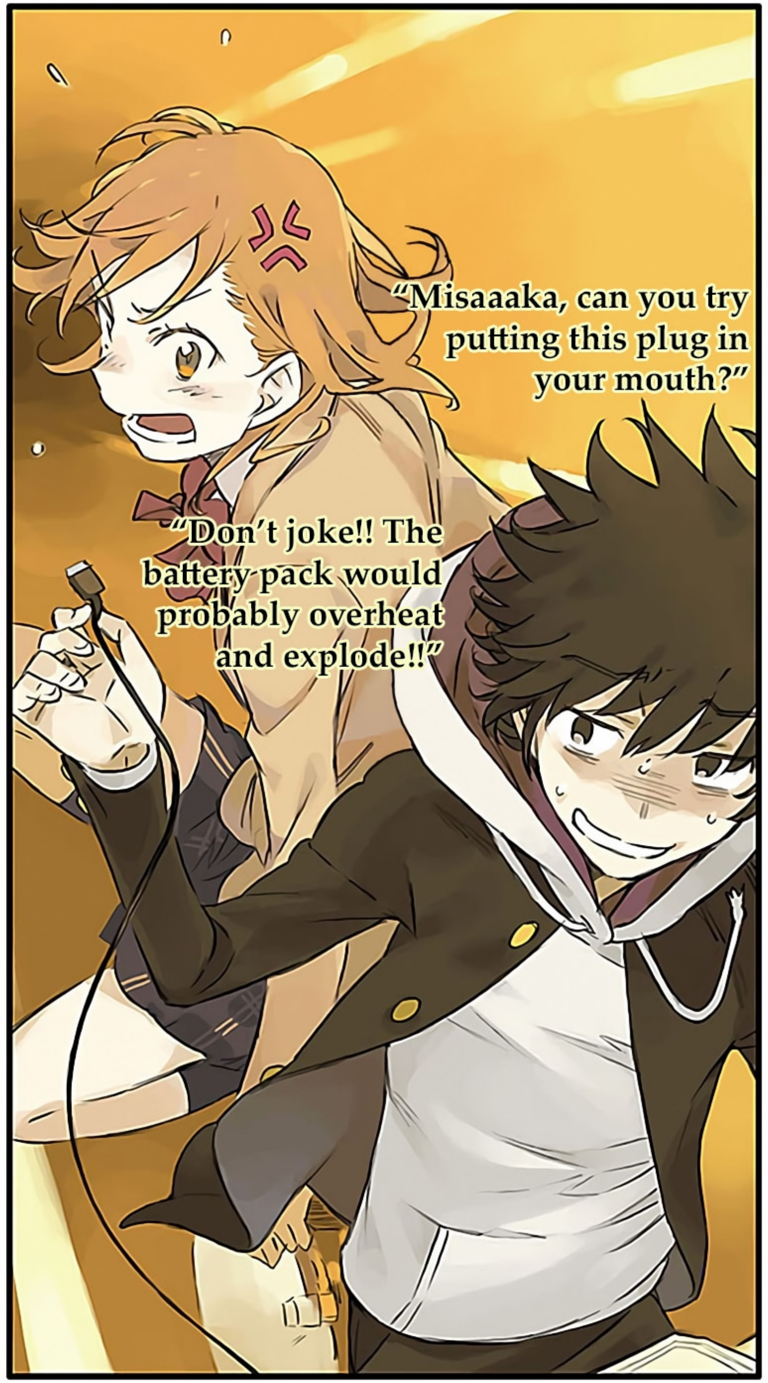
"Sorry if we scared you, boy."

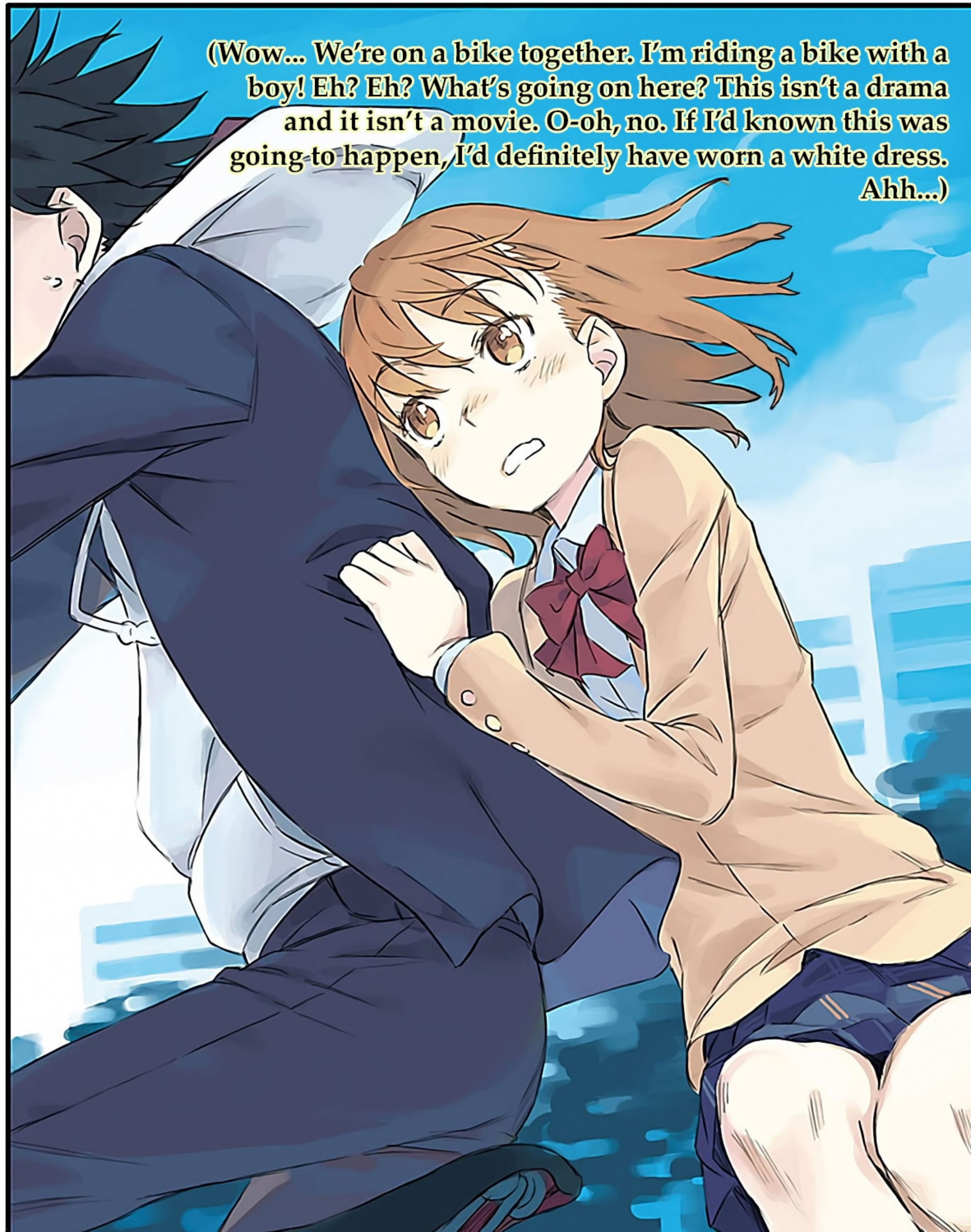
A Magic God and a member of the true Gremlin that has attacked Academy City

Nephthys

Designed by Hirokazu Watanabe(2725 Inc.)


"No!! I won't let you have him!!"


"Misaaaka, can you try putting this plug in your mouth?"
"Don't joke!! The battery pack would probably overheat and explode!!"


(Wow... We're on a bike together. I'm riding a bike with a boy! Eh? Eh? What's going on here? This isn't a drama and it isn't a movie. O-oh, no. If I'd known this was going to happen, I'd definitely have worn a white dress. Ahh...)

"Ho ho. Is that all you have,
Kamijou Touma? Then I suppose
it is time for the harvest."

A Magic God and a member of the true
Gremlin that has attacked Academy City

High Priest

Prologue: Another Possible Demise — Before_the_End.

There might be a discrepancy in our opinions.

For now, let's go over what information we have.

The world will suddenly end one day.

When you put it that way, some people might have a reflexive urge to argue. They assume someone had to be filled with a desire to destroy the world through tragedy, that they had to put together an over-the-top plan, that they had to go through a long period of preparation, that they had to work through a few smaller incidents to act as the ignition, and that they would fire off a huge firework at the very, very end to actually destroy the world. Those people assume ending something as vague as "the world" would require an absurd amount of work and that, with something on so large a scale, there would be a 99.9% or greater chance of it being detected and stopped ahead of time.

However, that is not entirely accurate.

How about we think of it like this instead?

The world will not be destroyed because some charismatic evil leader stood at the pinnacle of darkness.

The world will be destroyed all on its own if left alone.

Just as humans wither up all on their own if they forget to breathe or eat, the world will roll down the hill to destruction if it is simply left to the ravages of time. The world has only lasted to this day and this moment because a great many people are desperately holding that giant snowball up and keeping it from rolling down.

That is why the end will come suddenly.

No matter how hard people work, the world’s end will arrive like an unexpected death. Even if everyone’s work manages to avoid that end once, there is no guarantee that death will not make a second visit. Through the ages and eons, the world has fallen ill and been in accidents. And one day, it will be tormented by its own lifespan.

The world will not be destroyed because something special happens.

The world is only being maintained because something special is happening.

In that case, it would only be natural to run across such an ending from time to time.

Chapter 1: The Magic God is Always There — Sword_and_Sheath.

Part 1

He roared along.

Kamijou Touma raced through the concrete jungle of District 7.

He was not riding a normal car.

He was on an acrobike.

It was essentially a bicycle with electric assistance, but its top speed was over fifty kmh, its electronically-controlled suspension softened any impacts, and the giant disc-shaped gyros on either side of the front and back wheels gave it autonomous stability that kept it from falling over even when tilted to over seventy degrees. It was best known for being able to jump over two meters high using the suspension.

The pointy-haired boy violently pedaled the bike.

Something was approaching from behind.

It was closing in.

A great darkness had become a steel gale. It devoured any obstacles in the way. When a normal car drove into it from the side at an intersection, it knocked aside the car like a toy.

Normally, there would have been nothing anyone could do.

However, Kamijou Touma was an exception.

He sometimes used the road and sometimes took shortcuts by making large jumps to ride along the guardrail or sidewalk railing. He pumped out extreme speed without ever giving up. Tightrope walking with a bicycle may have seemed like a tricky stunt, but it was not all that difficult a cycle art using the acrobike's exceedingly powerful gyro functionality.

A high-pitched alarm blared and a railway crossing gate lowered in front of him. A train was not going to rush by at tremendous speed. The slow freight train must have run into trouble because it was stopped, forming a long line blocking his way.

Kamijou's way was blocked to the front and back.

However, he did not grab the brake lever. In fact, he placed more of his weight on the pedals. He truly produced his full speed. It looked like he was going to break through the railway crossing gate and collide with the container car, but that was not his plan.

He used another cycle art: sliding.

He swung the handlebars to the right just before reaching the railway crossing to turn the acrobike perpendicular to its direction of movement. He then tilted it as far to the left as possible and slipped below the railway crossing gate like a sliding baseball or soccer player. He then passed below the freight train's high bottom and let the gyro recovery system right the acrobike again.

The dull sound of metal bending metal exploded behind him, but his battle was not over.

Without even giving him a break, several four-wheel drive vehicles approached from a different small road.

The dull sound of metal bending metal exploded behind him, but his battle was not over.

Without even giving him a break, several four-wheel drive vehicles approached from a different small road.

Part 2

“Heh…eh heh heh. I-it’ll be like this, Kamijou-chan. Be sure to make the event as exciting as you-…”

“There’s no way I can do this!”

Part 3

“W-wahh, wahhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!! Your attendance was already bad enough in the first term, but things are even worse now that it’s December and the second term. At this rate, no amount of working things out will save your chances of advancing to the next year, Kamijou-chan!!”

Thirty minutes had passed since Tsukuyomi Komoe, Kamijou Touma’s 135 cm homeroom teacher, had come crying to him.

Plenty of arguing had occurred in the intervening time.

Dirtied high schooler Kamijou Touma rested his elbow on the hallway windowsill and stared into the distance with a look of melancholy in his eyes.

The problem was how he was dressed.

First of all, the pointy-haired boy was not wearing his school uniform. However, he was not wearing his PE uniform either. He was of course not wearing a swimsuit, but surprisingly, that was the closest to the truth. It was 9 AM on December 3. Even if he had run away to snowy Denmark with the nearly-naked Othinus, this did not seem like a rational choice, but it was what he was wearing regardless.

He wore full-body flesh-colored tights.

The only other real clothing was a pair of white briefs.

Lastly, he wore a trench coat that looked right out of a Showa era comedy routine.

“Sigh… When I think about it, I’ve been through some crazy stuff.”

Kamijou Touma, the boy who had ended World War Three with a single fist and made an enemy of the entire world to protect a single girl, dandily muttered that comment while dressed like an absolute pervert.

Then again, this would likely have already broken him if he had not been through all of that.

He recalled what Komoe-sensei had told him.

“When you’ve skipped as much class as you have, Kamijou-chan, extra lessons during winter break aren’t enough! So your only option is to earn a whole bunch of points with an amazing performance as a criminal in our anti-crime orientation!! Um, you’ll still need extra lessons even with this, so don’t get your hopes up too much, okay?”

At any rate…

(I’m up against the entire student body, but it’s not like a game of tag where I lose if I’m caught. I just have to run around shouting for the allotted time, so this’ll be easy! And normal! I’ll show them the survival skills of normal high school boy Kamijou Touma!!)

That was when he heard hurried footsteps coming from the stairway. The anti-crime orientation had already begun and it seemed the others were already chasing down one of the “criminals”. Kamijou somewhat cautiously looked over because he did not want to get caught up in it himself, but it was a familiar face that ran into the hallway.

“Huh? Tsuchimikado?”

“N-nyah! Kami-yan, it’s dangerous here! Hurry and…hm!?”

Aogami Pierce arrived after him.

This created the miraculous sight of the idiot trio gathered together in matching skin-colored tights, white briefs, and trench coats.

However, Aogami Pierce took it a step further with a pair of panties over his head.

“Ohh, Kami-ya-gyhhh!!!???”

Before he could finish his first word, it looked like his neck bent in a sideways “V”.

It of course could not have actually done that. It should not have been able to, but that was how it replayed in Kamijou’s mind no matter how many times he tried to make sense of it.

In reality, Aogami Pierce’s neck had been tightly grasped by the U-shaped sasumata that flew in from the stairway. He was then sent flying to the opposite wall. As he struggled (Or convulsed? No, it couldn’t be.), more and more sasumatas flew in to pin his arms, legs, and torso to the wall.

What was that?

What in the world was it!?

A sasumata was a restraining tool shaped a lot like a medieval man catcher. It looked like a mop pole with a U-shaped piece of metal at the end and it was meant to safely hold the criminal’s body in place, so it was certainly not meant to be thrown like an assassin’s decapitation tool.

“G-gyhhh… I-I wonder if it’s true what they say about it feeling a lot better if you do it while being strangl- gogyhh!?”

Just as Aogami’s suffering began to transform into ecstasy, he received the finishing blow and went limp.

Kamijou cried out in his white briefs.

“Wh-what happened, Aogami!? And we were only given briefs, not panties!! Where did those come from!?”

“Don’t be stupid, Kami-yan! This is no time to worry about the dead, nyah!”

Step.

Step.

The grim reaper appeared with a sound as methodical as the ticking of a clock. Long black hair was parted wide, a mysterious steam-like aura left the mouth, and red light came from the eyes. As the coup de grace, the vicious fiend used only two arms to hold as many sasumatas as a bug had legs. Now, who was it?

“Fukiyose-san!? C’mon, this isn’t the time for you to finally reveal your hidden power! Besides, wasn’t your power the ability to do this with that to make it do that thing!?”

“The crime of making a pure maiden cry is a weighty one, you perverrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrts!!”

“To ho ho. As always, this old man wasn’t willing to hear us out.”

“Oh, is that what’s going on here? Why did Aogami have to go too far and get us caught in the crossfire!?”

They showed no sign of trying to save their crucified classmate.

Tsuchimikado was entirely focused on running down the hallway, but Kamjiou, man among men in white briefs, had a different idea.

He did not hesitate to lean right out the open window.

He ignored the rush of sasumatas assaulting Tsuchimikado (who was supposedly one of the greatest onmyouji experts and a spy in Academy City for multiple sides) and made a miraculous escape from the third floor window and onto the drain spout running vertically along the wall. There was a good reason that Kamijou

Touma had made it to Part 42 of “What if your school’s students were replaced by aliens one by one?” and “What if you took over your school to create a kid’s kingdom?” in just the second term. (It was probably his fault that the amount of alcohol Komoe-sensei consumed had secretly gone up.) He hesitated over whether to escape up or down, but going down scared him because it would require checking how high up he was. For the time being, he kept his eyes on the sky with the safe fourth floor as his goal.

However…

“Huh? It won’t open.”

He shook the window with his feet on the edge of the windowsill.

It was locked.

“Oh, no! It really won’t open!! And if I stay here for too long, the Fukiyose army is going to fire up at my ass from below!!”

Part 4

Misaka Mikoto let out another white breath as she walked through District 7.

It was just past nine in the morning. If they had known this lady of Tokiwadai Middle School was wandering around the streets on a school day morning, her elegant foreign language teacher probably would have fainted and the monstrous dorm supervisor probably would have ripped off her coat to let her muscles swell out, but things were different just this once.

She held the following printout:

Fire precautions! The anti-crime orientation is coming up. This winter in District 7, the boundaries between schools will be lifted for some group roleplaying meant to raise anti-crime awareness.

If you’re playing a criminal, please surprise everyone.

If you're playing a police officer, please capture the criminals.

If you're playing a hostage, please run away from the criminals.

Everyone will be given a stamp each time they fulfill their role. Aim to conquer your stamp card! A fantastical hidden school lunch menu awaits you!!

(This doesn't have anything to do with fire precautions.)

It may have started as a small event concerning arson countermeasures and had later grown into an orientation for crime in general that had no hint of the original event left.

At any rate, Mikoto had been assigned a police officer role.

Then again, the road here had not been an easy one.

After all, the area she was walking through was near that pointy-haired boy's school.

(Shokuhou Misaki put up a quite a fight.)

The memory of it brought a tingle to her spine. The game of paper sumo wrestling had truly come down to the wire. Yokozuna Shokuhou had hidden some cardboard in her origami figure and stuck some pieces of eraser on its feet to increase its weight, so Mikoto would have been helpless had she not used a metal clip to let her freely move her origami doll around via magnetism.

It might have seemed like those high-class ladies were playing dirty, but they had been fighting over a single prize.

(The rights to the area with that idiot's high school.)

Misaka Mikoto clenched her fist as she relished the flavor of victory once more.

Plus, she had an actual goal in mind, unlike that honey-colored succubus. She had a reason worth distancing both Shokuhou and Shirai Kuroko.

(How was all that stuff at Tokyo Bay resolved?)

Yes.

She had worked alongside him at Tokyo Bay, exchanged blows with him in the snow of Denmark, and somehow found herself pushing him onward, but why had that Othinus person ended up on his side, why had he ended up running away from Mikoto and the others without telling them anything, and why had he ended up giving Othinus an emotional embrace on TV? She had never received an explanation for any of that.

She might not have cared that much if she had only seen it on an LCD screen from the other side of the world. He and Othinus had likely gone through something only they understood and had reconciled their differences. Everyone else was only seeing the highlight reel. She might have been able to accept that.

But Mikoto herself had been a part of it.

At the very least, she had been until they stepped onto Sargasso in Tokyo Bay.

She had been in a position to make any decision she wanted as one of the central players.

Yet in the very end, she found she understood nothing.

That filled her chest with noise. Not even she could explain just what emotion it was, but something with a sharp point to it was poking at the surface of her heart.

(Neither of us had the time for a long talk then.)

She thought to herself in silence.

(But now that it’s all over, I at least have the right to hear just what happened from beginning to end, don’t I? In fact, it *is* over, isn’t it?)

One day had led into another and Christmas time was fast approaching, but she had no real guarantee of that. In her relief and excitement when returning to Academy City, she had almost completely forgotten, but once the heat faded and she could think rationally, she found she could not relax with things the way they were.

She had to deal with this first.

There was one thing she was most worried about.

(He seemed really cornered back in Denmark.)

It had gone beyond simply being pursued by so many people and being physically and mentally exhausted. She had heard that boy complain. She had seen his weak side that he must have normally kept hidden because he was forced into the category of “older boy”, “high schooler”, or “upperclassman”.

This time, Mikoto intended to hear everything.

She had no reason to hold back on that.

But if she did this, his weak side would be the problem. That boy would want to avoid showing off the softest side of his heart with a lot of extra people around.

That was why Mikoto had needed to keep the #5 and anyone else away.

(It’s possible the answer won’t be enough to give me relief.)

Her preparations were complete.

(It’s possible my view of that idiot will change the instant I learn the answer.)

She had no guarantee that she would be okay with this, but she could only continue down the path she considered right.

(But I stood near the center of that commotion, so I still need to learn the answer. That’s why I’ve made up my mind. No matter how filthy, pathetic, or hopeless a thing you’re holding inside, I’m prepared to accept it. I swear I won’t selfishly hurt you after I was the one to ask.)

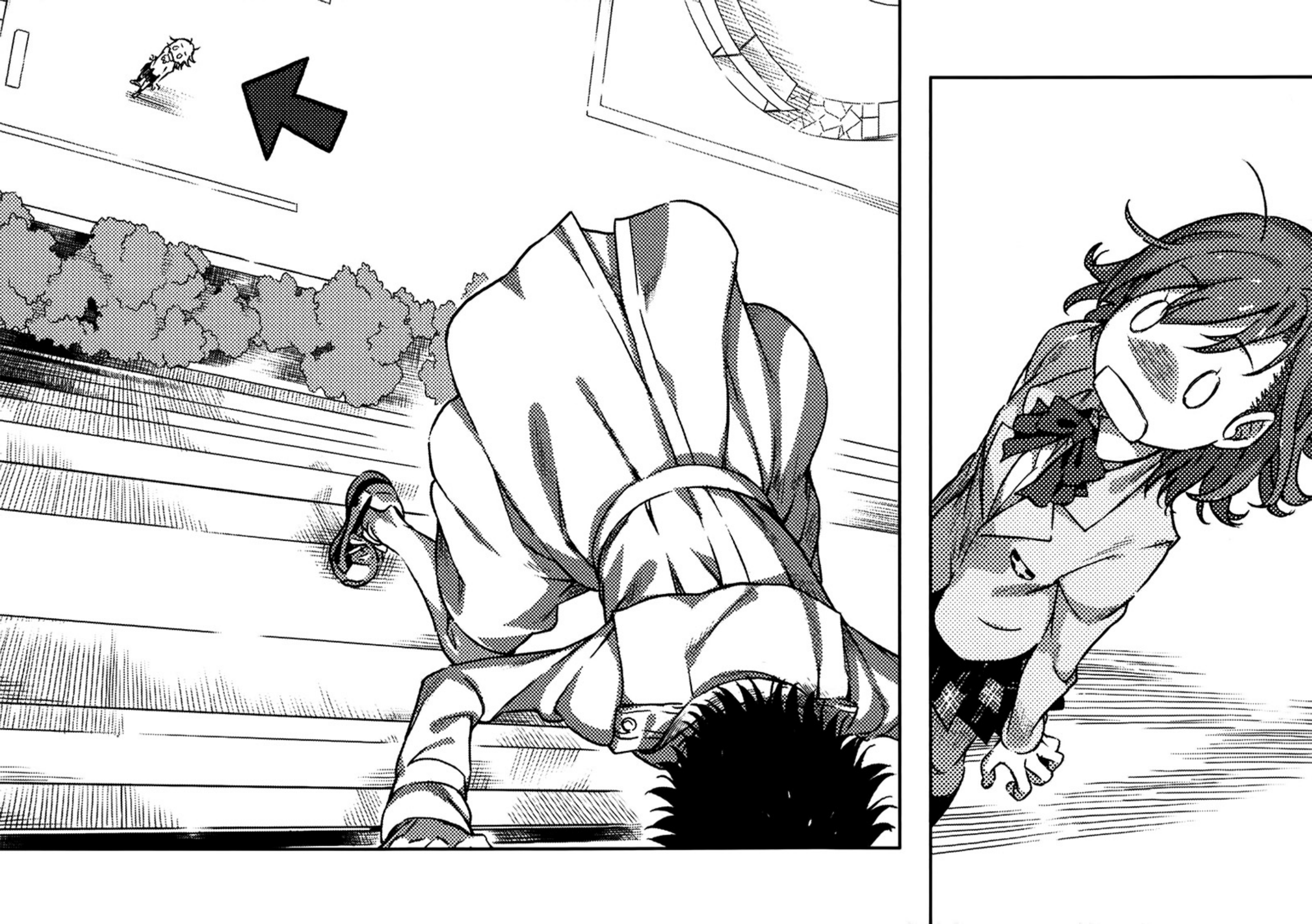
She focused her mind and raised her head.

She gathered strength in her gut.

She had thought about a lot, but the situation changed entirely once she arrived at a certain high school.

Her mistake was wondering if there was a small back entrance for faculty because she was too embarrassed to casually cut across the large schoolyard and enter the main entrance.

Once she arrived in the courtyard, she saw something.



A reckless pervert was peeping into a fourth-floor window while clinging to the wall like a frog.

The blowing wind allowed glimpses of white briefs inside the coat and she recognized the pointy-hair of Kamijou Touma.

Mikoto’s mind went entirely blank.

It seemed fate was cruelly made.

One of them was playing a police officer and the other was playing a criminal.

Tokiwadai’s ace made full use of her mind and even tried falsifying memories to somehow force this into a Romeo and Juliet narrative, but it proved hopeless.

That was when anger took over.

“I may have said I’d accept any answer, but that only goes so farrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr!!”

She jumped straight past using a lightning spear or iron sand sword.

An arcade coin flew through the air right off the bat.

Part 5

In that instant, there was no way for Kamijou to avoid having his butt pierced at three times the speed of sound, but an upperclassman girl full of mature charm rescued him at the last second.

She unlocked the window from the inside, pulled Kamijou Touma in as he clung to the very edge of the windowsill, and brought him to a nearby empty classroom.

She had shoulder-length black hair and a winter sailor uniform that showed off her midriff because it was too small (in the chest).

She was Kumokawa Seria-senpai.

“O-ohh, ohhhhhh…”

“Sigh. I don’t know what’s going on, but things are really noisy today. This is making it impossible to get a midday nap. …No, given the time, I guess it’s more of a morning nap.”

“Ohhhhhhhhhhh! Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh, senpaaaai!!”

“What!? Why are you crying like a monster that was finally treated like a human being after having everyone throw stones at him!?”

Kamijou just about leapt into that chest overflowing with motherhood, but this girl had seriously saved his life back there. Based on how the school was still shaking from further blasts, that was no joke. He did not want to bother her, so he gathered the strength of his heart to restrain himself.

However, Kumokawa Seria had secretly tensed her shoulders and elbows in preparation, so she pouted her lips when nothing happened.

“(Hm. Sometimes being a gentleman can come full circle and be cruel.)”

“?”

“Nothing.”

She gave up on her welcoming pose, crossed her arms to lift her ample chest from below, and spoke entirely casually.

“Well, if you’re on the run, you can relax here for a while. This is my secret base.”

At first glance, the empty classroom only seemed to contain roughly piled-up desks and chairs, but looking around the room from the blackboard end showed a space filled with sunny window side spots. It also contained a small cooler full of chocolate snacks, convenience store cake, and bottles of drinks. Manga magazines and a small bath TV were also scattered about. A blanket was laid out on the floor and it was covered by a super thin and warm monster of a blanket. The advertisements he had seen on TV said it was made from some kind of material used on trips to space.

Kumokawa pointed here and there while sitting in her usual spot.

“You can grab whatever you want that’s lying around.”

“Hmm. I think I’ll pass.”

He was actually incredibly interested in the snow viewing Mont Blanc that was only sold in the winter, but something in petite bourgeois Kamijou stopped him from eating snacks at school. Even after passing through hundreds of billions of hells, confronting an actual god, and chatting with the US president, some things simply did not go away.

“Ugh. The bath TV’s showing a special on the acrobike.”

“I hear you backed out. How boring.”

“Were you the one pushing for that!? I read through all the documents, but there’s no way I can do that! Cycle arts? Doing that in the streets is a good way of breaking some bones!!”

Kumokawa seductively lay on the blanket, reached for the weekly manga magazine she had been reading, and surreptitiously hid it below the monster of a blanket. She instead forcibly opened a women’s fashion magazine to show off her upperclassman aura.

“By the way, senpai, what role were you given?”

“A hostage, I think. I didn’t really care, so I don’t remember.”

“A hostage…”

“Heh heh. Looks like you just upped your score, boy. You have a hostage now.”

Kumokawa gave a bewitching smile that seemed to have some hidden meaning, but Kamijou could not decide whether improving his score as the criminal was a good thing or not when the role had essentially been forced onto him as a type of punishment. This scared him because one wrong step would lead to being held back.

As he wondered about that, he heard multiple sets of footsteps racing down the hallway and Kumokawa's eyebrows twitched as she lay in the sun by the window.

"Someone's coming."

"Oh, honestly. They must have heard all the commotion Misaka was making by firing everywhere. And why is she even at our school anyway?"

"How about we choose our words more carefully?"

"Oh, no. It isn't Fukiyose, is it!? She's scary!!"

"If you're worried, then keep quiet and hide. Get in here."

Kumokawa shoved Kamijou under the monster of a blanket covering her legs. This was of course an upperclassman kind of thing that not just anyone could do, but…

"M-mgh! Senpai, um, there's something…shoved against my face!"

"Quiet."

"But, something's…what is this? It's hard? Senpai? Eh? Why? Ehh? And these corners… Please tell me this isn't true. Are girls not as soft as I'd been led to believe? This can't be true!!"

(Tch! It's that manga magazine I shoved in there earlier!!)

Kumokawa ground her teeth at the fact that Kamijou had at least not seen what it was, but she could not turn back time.

Fortunately, the footsteps in the hallway did not reach the empty classroom. The hallway itself had likely become a scene of unthinkable horrors, so the individual's focus had turned to the attacker down on the ground level.

After making absolutely sure the footsteps had left, Kamijou crawled out of his upperclassman's blanket.

He felt like he had unlocked quite a few achievements in life's trophy system over the past few minutes, but all he had actually felt was something with hard corners and the sweet aroma of chocolate. He could get all of that on his own at a nearby convenience store.

"Pwah. Is Fukiyose gone? You really saved me."

"The orientation isn't limited to our school, right? If you're really worried for your life, it would probably be best to evacuate the school grounds until the heat dies down."

"Y-you're right. Okay! Thanks a bunch, senpai! I'll be going now!!"

"Eh? No, wait. I was suggesting I could wander around with you!!"

He thought she had said something more, but he left Kumokawa Seria's secret base as quickly as he could. Staying too long could reveal that base to the others and he doubted she wanted that.

He poked his head out the door, observed the hallway (which was almost falling apart thanks to the Railgun blasts), and first made sure no one was there.

Kamijou, the warrior in skin-colored full-body tights and white briefs, made his way down the hallway with the speed of a cockroach, descended the stairs, and made his way to the first floor entrance.

"I-I'm glad to see you know how to play the role of the pervert."

"Huh? Senpai? Why are you here?"

He turned around by the shoe lockers and Kumokawa Seria cleared her throat.

“You can head outside if you want, but there will be ‘police officers’ out on the streets, too. Do you know how you’ll escape and what you’ll use for transportation?”

“Yeah, no worries there. There’s that new bicycle…um, the acrobike? Y’know, that electrically assisted monster. Komoe-sensei got a little carried away and ordered one for us, so I can borrow that.”

“(Now, I’m getting pissed off. He never thinks anything through, so why is he so prepared now of all times!?)”

“Senpai?”

Kamijou tilted his head and shoved a hand inside his shoe locker.

He felt something unexpected inside.

Whatever it was fluttered weightlessly through the air and he grabbed it before it reached the floor.

It was an envelope.

It was an elegant greenish-brown envelope that seemed to be made of high-quality Japanese paper. It also had cherry blossom decorations here and there.

After looking at the front, looking at the back, flipping it over again and again, and otherwise inspecting it, White Briefs Kamijou completed his appraisal with a tight expression.

“It’s a love letter!?”

“Wha-?”

Kumokawa Seria’s face instantly went pale.

“Wha-?”

Misaka Mikoto similarly tensed up while pressed against the wall near the entrance after being chased around by the other students.

But Kamijou Touma noticed neither girl’s reaction.

With the letter in hand, he began to wander toward some place where he could be alone, but he remembered the anti-crime orientation was still underway, hesitantly moved back and forth, and finally tore open the envelope’s seal where he was because he could not resist any longer.

He checked its contents.

The letter was also on high-quality Japanese paper. It was beautiful paper that would probably have been transparent when held up to the light. Slender handwriting covered the paper, but high school boy Kamijou had trouble reading it. Still, he made full use of his inadequate brain to read just the parts he could make out.

“I…am…waiting…on the…roof…top?”

For a while, he had trouble grasping the situation, but understanding finally arrived. It sank in like melting ice.

He held the letter overhead in both hands and began spinning around in crazed joy.

“Yahoooooooo!!!!! It’s finally happened! It’s fiiiiiiinally haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaappened!! This isn’t a drama and it isn’t a movie!! Love is real after allllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllllll!!”

(I’m going to kill him!!)

(I’m going to kill him!!)

Both the upperclassman and underclassman types cursed him, but he gave that no thought whatsoever.

That was when the cruel side of Kumokawa Seria reared its ugly head.

“B-but don’t you have someone you like, a girl you’re interested in, or an older girl you’re always thinking about? Like a nearby upperclassman?”

“Thaaaat is a *completely* different issue!! Getting a love letter and having a girl be the one who confesses her love to you is enough to earn one of life’s trophiiiiiiiiieeeeeeeeeeeeeeessssssssssssssssss!!”

(I’m going to kill him and bury him! District 21’s mountains should work!!)

(I’m going to kill him and bury him! District 21’s mountains should work!!)

Oblivious to the angry girls, Kamijou tried again and again to read the illegible letter.

“But what is this? It’s got a refined or even old-fashioned feel to it. …Ah! The anti-crime orientation means girls from other schools might be here! It might be someone from a sheltered girl’s school!!”

He of course had no idea a girl from just such a school was curled up and holding her heart just five meters away.

“The name. What about her name? …Oh, there’s something at the end. Is this it!? H-hi-high? That’s it!! It starts with ‘high’!! So is it a school name? I can't read the next part, but I bet it's the name of some all-girls high school! Okay, time to go!! The stairs to adulthood await me on the roof!!"

In his skin-colored tights and white briefs, Kamijou changed direction with a frightening burst of speed. If he had calmed down, he would probably have started worrying about what to say if a girl really was waiting for him, but he was far from calm. And after being completely left behind, Kumokawa Seria (+1) gave a comment of her own.

"Why would anyone sign a letter with their school's name?"

Part 6

Once the pervert named Kamijou Touma finished climbing the stairs to adulthood, he flung open the door to the rooftop.

The winds of freedom blew through and the rooftop seemed to stretch on forever.

And who did he find restlessly waiting for him?

"Hello. Did you read my letter, Kamijou Touma?"

It was a mysterious old man (or rather, a mummy) whose dried skin split apart in a smile.

………

"Heh."

Kamijou Touma gave a weak laugh.

At the same time, he clenched his fist hard enough that he thought it would break and he opened his eyes in such a ghastly expression it seemed tears of blood were going to start flowing from them.

“I had a feeling it was something like this. I didn’t get my hopes at all. Not in the slightest!! You’re probably some magician after Index, so hurry up and attack so I can destroy your illusion alreadyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!”

“Now, now. Not so fast. What good is exchanging blows before you even know who I am? Wasn’t it challenging a god of magic so quickly that got you sent to the depths of the abyss with Othinus?”

“God…of magic?”

“Precisely.”

The mummy’s purple robe had luxurious pure-gold decorations which made him too gaudy to call a monk. He also pressed a gold sword against the concrete floor as a staff.

“I am one of the true Magic Gods. My name is…yes, you can call me the High Priest, just as I signed my letter.”

This was different yet again from St. Germain. He made no exaggerated gestures or turns of phrase that were meant to convince Kamijou. He was entirely casual about it all. His careless usage of the term Magic God gave him an intense presence different from Othinus’s.

In an instant, bits and pieces of frightening memories stabbed into the back of Kamijou Touma’s mind.

He had already grown a bit tearful.

Then he spoke.

“There’s no way I’m going through hundreds of billions of hells with you!!”

“Yes, I suppose that wouldn’t seem like much of a reward.”

“I’m not making an enemy of the world and running through Denmark’s blizzards either!!”

“Perhaps Nephthys or Niang-Niang would have been better suited for dealing with a teenage boy.”

That initially seemed like a meaningless comment, but it also seemed to be saying something concerning.

First of all, was this mummy (or an old man filled with so much ridiculous technology that it looked like a corpse was living and speaking) really a Magic God?

And hadn’t he just mentioned a few other names as if they were the same as him? Was it safe to assume there were more like him?

Kamijou finally gulped and the mummy known as the High Priest cackled.

“Good. It is only natural for a human to reach an understanding more slowly than a Magic God would and I am not so impatient that I would let that irritate me.”

“…”

“You are trying to apply the situations from recent events to me, aren’t you? That puts your understanding a few steps behind, but I can play along. What you saw in the *St. Germain* event does not apply to me. You should immediately give up on the optimistic hope that I am a fake pretending to be a Magic God.”

“…”

“You just wondered why I am here, didn’t you? From that point of view, St. Germain is ever so slightly applicable. He said a sword had once chosen a king and he chose Aihana Etsu, correct? Then I have a question for you. What do you think a Magic God would be trying to choose? Well, understander of Othinus?”

He knew about the St. Germain incident and he knew about the understanding that should only have been known to Kamijou and Othinus.

That was enough to indicate this mummy known as the High Priest was something special, but then Kamijou slowly let out a voice heavier than the air.

“Before that, can I ask you an important question?”

“What might that be?”

“If we’re going to talk about some unbelievable hidden side of the world, can I take this off first?”

Yes.

As the target of the anti-crime orientation, Kamijou was wearing skin-colored tights, white briefs, and a trench coat.

The High Priest’s eyes opened wide (even if it was unclear whether he actually had eyeballs or not).

He then spoke in a tone that suggested he was about to be overwhelmed by the trembling of his heart.

“You only enter your serious mode when you remove your briefs!?”

“Don’t make things up, old man.”

Part 7

Now.

Once Kamijou removed his skin-colored tights, his normal school uniform was revealed. The tights had appeared skintight because he had stuffed them full of cotton to create a silhouette one size larger than his real one. He had gone to the trouble because the freezing December air would have taken his soul away if he had worn nothing but full-body tights.

He could still hear the excited shouting of the anti-crime orientation in the distance, but he calmed himself and observed the oddity before him.

"It doesn't look like I can call this a joke. You really are a corpse."

"Hm. You accepted Othinus who gouged out an eye and hung herself. I don't see how I'm much different."

The High Priest rapped on his waist with a dried hand.

He should have been dead, but he moved like a living human.

It would have been easier to accept if someone said he had metal wires running through him and he was being electronically controlled.

Kamijou had met a great variety of people: Archangel Misha Kreutzev, the immortal Fräulein Kreutune, and Kakine Teitoku who could create his own body. He had seen plenty of people who had surpassed the limits of the human body, but the High Priest was somehow different from all of them.

He was not shifting the burden anywhere else. He simply was a mummy naturally. Kamijou could not even imagine what the old man would have looked like in life. That was how unique a situation the High Priest had created in himself.

There was nothing to say whether he was nor was not a Magic God.

Kamijou did not want there to be multiple beings on the level of Othinus's full power, but that was a hope, not an answer.

"I have mostly grasped how quickly you catch on. Now, where should I begin?"

The High Priest calmly resumed talking as he stood on the rooftop.

"Oh, I know. How would you define this world?"

"…"

The world.

"No need to grow so defensive. I'm not going to quibble about the world being recreated by Othinus after your fight with her. I am talking about your impression of the world. What comes to mind when you hear that word?"

Not many people would think of every nook and cranny of the planet when they heard the word "world". Nor would their imaginations "realistically" fly all the way out to the whole solar system or galaxy.

For Kamijou, the world was only the lines connecting the locations where his friends and acquaintances were.

Of course, for a variety of reasons, he personally knew a lot more people than the average person.

"Don't you find it odd?"

The High Priest shifted the conversation in a completely unexpected direction.

"Quite a few world-shaking incidents have occurred to reach this point. In fact, one was quite literally world-*shattering*. But why did they all occur within your reach? That almost makes it sound like you stand in the center of the world."

"What?"

"The world is a fragile thing. The six or seven billion people living here do not all support it equally. In that way, Imagine Breaker truly is a thick pillar for the world, but that leads to another question. Why did that exceedingly mysterious reference point and repair point for the world end up inside an individual's right hand? Personally, I think that makes the chosen boy even more unique than the power itself."

"…"

Kamijou looked down to his right hand.

It was not that he had never questioned Imagine Breaker's presence. He had entrusted his life to it plenty of times. Was there or was there not an answer to that power? That question was constantly in a corner of his mind.

But why had it been him?

Had he ever asked that before?

After giving it some thought, he finally spoke.

"That's nonsense."

"Oh?"

"It's true the world might look fragile to some people. To a Magic God up in the clouds, it's something you can remake as many times as you like. …But that's still wrong. This isn't an RPG that was made to be beaten and it doesn't just reach 'the end' once it is beaten. I'm in the center? I'm the pillar supporting it? If so, the world's lifespan is only about one hundred years. That just can't be. It'll continue on even when I die."

"How naïve. Or were you too thoroughly imprinted with the idea that all people are equal?"

"Of course they all are."

"Heh heh. Even though this very country's laws consider the murder of a doctor or firefighter to be a greater crime than the murder of a normal person? Even though killing a child is considered a greater crime than killing an old man? The punishment is determined based on how many people the victim could have saved in the future or how much money they would have made, so a completely unequal system is running rampant. You might as well be pointing at the normal person who was normally killed and telling them they never would have amounted to much of anything anyway."

"That's sophistry."

"Perhaps."

The High Priest readily admitted it.

He must not have ever expected to defeat Kamijou with that argument.

"But the general idea is correct. Namely, that you are positioned very near the center of the world. Otherwise, the Observer would not be serving so nearby."

"The Observer?"

"Yes." The High Priest paused for a moment. "I do not know if you have actually seen them. And even if you have, who can say if it was ever written to your long-term memory. But they are definitely there. Yes, within ten meters of you."

"…?"

Kamijou looked around in confusion.

There was no one on the large rooftop except for him and the High Priest and there was nowhere to hide.

"Who is this Observer you're talking about? Is it you?"

"Of course not. They would never need to meet you directly like this. Nor would they need to ask you anything. The Observer simply remains by your side at all times and watches everything you do. They know the answers to the questions before they are given, they compile it all, and they construct a massive collection of information."

"What…are you talking about?"

"Let me say it again, you have likely seen the Observer already."

Hearing that, something felt a little off somewhere in Kamijou Touma's head.

It was like a slight itching at the end of a finger telling him of a tiny hangnail.

“Think back. They would have always been there: in a corner of the classroom, at school events, at the Daihaseisai, and around the hot pots you ate with your class.”

“…Huh?”

“There must be someone. Someone who wears the same uniform and blends into the background like they belong, but whose name you don’t know and whose voice you’re not sure you would recognize. Just saying they’re in your class isn’t enough of an explanation. Think back to your nightmares running from alpha to omega that Othinus gave you. The Observer would have blended into the background there looking entirely unconcerned. They may have turned their back or to the side on occasion, but they would always have been keeping an eye on you.”

Large beads of sweat poured down Kamijou’s forehead.

And they did not stop there. His entire body was soaked.

It really was strange.

Now that he had it pointed out to him, it really was strange.

“Her… That girl with the short brown hair and the headband… Come to think of it, who is she!? I feel like she’s been nonchalantly showing up everywhere I go!!”

“Then she would be the nameless Observer.”

The High Priest grinned and revealed a truth of the world.

“This world is nothing but a story told from the Observer’s point of view as she makes use of her ability to read minds.”

Kamijou just about cried out in surprise, but he was cut off.

“Just kidding!!”

“Just kidding!? All that lead up and it was just a joooooooke!? You really scared me. I was thinking there was some deeper meaning there! But of course she’s just a classmate!!”

Kamijou held his chest as his heart continued to beat unhealthily fast and this time he really did cry out.

“It’s really hard to tell when you’re joking!!”

It was true he was pretty sure he did not actually know that girl’s name even though she was a classmate, but he brought his mind back on track by telling himself it was just a joke and he would not find anything even if he did look into it.

The mummy High Priest cackled and did not seem to mind very much.

“But, Kamijou Touma, it is not all that wrong to view yourself as very near the center of the world.”

“You’re still insisting that?”

“You have ended up at the center, but that is not necessarily because of your own actions or because of overlapping coincidences. What if someone set it up that way and lifted you to that spot? For example, some people who can destroy something as incomprehensibly large as the world with a single fingertip.”

“…”

“So you’ve finally caught on.”

The High Priest said it suddenly.

He pointed at himself with a finger of skin and bones that looked like it was about ready to break off.

“I refer to us, the true Gremlin.”

Part 8

A cold wind blew across the school rooftop.

The racket from the anti-crime orientation sounded far, far away and seemed empty.

Meanwhile, the atmosphere between Kamijou and the High Priest had changed. It was clear the boy's caution had grown even more than before.

The High Priest, however, remained unchanged.

He seemed to be saying that nothing Kamijou Touma could do would be a threat to him.

"First of all, Gremlin is not a group that mixes science and magic, nor is it a collection of Norse magicians led by Othinus."

The High Priest readily spoke some information so secret both Academy City and the Anglican Church probably did not know it.

"And we true Magic Gods have no interest in ruling the world or exterminating any who oppose us. After all, we can create anything we need. Well, we are weakened at the moment *due to certain circumstances*, but let me talk about this from our normal position. Opposing someone is a method of using violence to make up for what you lack. We can freely create something large enough to be called the world, so we can produce any missing piece at the snap of a finger. It could be money, fame, social status, the past, facts themselves…and even lives that have been lost. *Once you have everything, you lose all reason to fight, don't you?*"

"…"

When he thought about it, that was a bit of a mystery.

Othinus had had a reason to become (or return to being?) a Magic God. It had been based in her desire to return to her own world that only she knew. She had needed to struggle through the human world in order to rise to the level of Magic God. She had needed violence to have her way in human society.

But what about the High Priest who already was a Magic God?

What did he and the other Magic Gods have?

Magic Gods would have no reason to enter into a conflict with humans. It was true humanity had enough weaponry to blow up the planet dozens of times over or to bring about their own ruin hundreds of times over. But if they used every last one of those weapons on the Magic Gods like there was a sale on implements of destruction, could they so much as scratch them?

If no attack could even make them budge, there was no point in striking back. It was similar to how Kamijou's intestines was full of bacteria, but he had no desire to wipe them all out.

And as already said, a Magic God could fulfill anything they needed. People would fight to remove the pain of their inadequacy. If any magicians or espers confronted a Magic God for their past, their own benefit, or revenge, the Magic God could defang them by fulfilling that inadequacy. Just as Kamijou had had no way of fighting that golden "happy world" that Othinus had shown him, someone obsessed with fighting would be left powerless in front of that perfection.

Then what did the Magic Gods want to do here?

The High Priest himself had said opposition was an attempt to make up for an inadequacy with violence. In that case, what inadequacy was afflicting them?

"It is simple." The mummy spoke simply while omitting anything unnecessary. "If you reach the end of the finite, it all returns to nothingness. But the infinite is not a mountain of excess. It is nothing other than an elimination of all desire. That itself is the state of enlightenment, but do you at least partially understand, boy?"

"No, I don't get it at all. I may claim to 'understand' Othinus, but I only know her as a girl. I don't understand anything when it comes to her being a Magic God."

"I see. When I hear that, I cannot help but feel even more annoyance with that Norse Magic God who selfishly made a mess of the world."

"…"

"But you are at least faintly aware of it, aren't you?" The High Priest seemed to be testing him. "We Magic Gods have everything. We have the power to destroy the world and remake it from scratch. Also, we feel no threat from the outside world. An attack from anything other than a Magic God would be less noticeable than a mosquito bite."

"Then your problem is…?"

"Yes. That leaves a struggle over resources with the other Magic Gods. We all have the power to change everything, but there is only one world. Think of it like having ten painters but only one canvas. If they each continually try to overwrite it as they see fit, it would develop into a fistfight. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

The golden world Othinus had shown him had only been happiness as she saw it. If there had been five or ten Magic Gods there, they each would have added their own ideas of happiness and come into conflict. As a result, they might have started fighting to protect their own version of happiness.

Simply put…

"If there had only been a single god, there would not have been a problem. But that is not how it turned out."

"So there's just too much power between all of you?"

"Hah hah! Indeed. That is a good way of putting it. We have too much power. And Gremlin is the *reconciliation council* that was created."

Kamijou recalled the idea of magic names.

Magicians carved those names into their hearts and they represented the original desire that led them to step from the normal path. They all self-deprecatingly said those desires would never be granted, but they still never stopped reaching for that jewel-like glitter.

But what if their wishes could be granted in five seconds?

They had not known if they could accomplish it even after a long, long life's work, so what if it was complete after just a few moments?

What would they do with the power they were left with?

And what if others also had enough power to singlehandedly create or destroy the world?

"It isn't something we could simply ignore," said the High Priest. "Kamijou Touma, do you believe in destiny?"

"Destiny?"

"Ha ha. That may be difficult for someone poisoned by science in Academy City, but you must have always felt that you were burdened with misfortune."

"…"

"There is such a thing as unavoidable destiny. There are powerful rails that cannot be overcome by an individual's decisions. But even that is ultimately nothing more than the result of an unseen clash between the opinions of Magic Gods. Of course, we have no intention of harming any specific individual. In fact, the individuals clinging to this puny planet never enter our field of vision. Still, our actions are constantly affecting the outside world and make great changes in the world. It can be quite a problem.”

Talk of fortune and misfortune reminded Kamijou of the Saints in addition to himself.

One of them was so constantly dealt a lucky hand that she feared those around her would always be dealt an unlucky hand.

“That is the same,” readily stated the High Priest. “It is true Saints fall on the fortunate side of things, but they had no say in being born a Saint. That means there were some larger rails in place there. The very fact that they receive that fortune as Saints was determined by that unshakeable destiny.”

At that point, the mummy laughed dryly.

“Although, if we’re talking about destiny, then you would be the sole exception. Thanks to your Imagine Breaker, even the vague power of us Magic Gods is uniformly leveled out. That keeps any large waves away from you alone and keeps you in constant misfortune.”

In other words…

“We do not bother looking to the outside.”

“…”

“We are only interested in the others inside Gremlin. *A world that is distorted by our own infighting* is like a house built on sand. Focusing on it is as meaningless as on a sandpainting that will be blown away by the wind. At this point, have you finally caught on that we mean no harm?”

The scale was simply too large.

It was like someone saying they would destroy the world using only the AIM diffusion fields. It was a proud announcement that there was more than just one of those special being; there was an entire group where it was entirely normal.

If Kamijou had not known better, he might have reflexively argued back, but he knew the power of a true Magic God.

If multiple individuals with Othinus's full power existed in a single world, he could see how they would end up in an unmanageable fight over their ideas of happiness.

In which case…

"Then why are you speaking with me? You aren't interested in the outside world, right?"

"Buddhism contains the idea of the Six Paths."

The High Priest began on a topic befitting the title he went by.

"That is the idea that all forms of life – whether human, animal, or deva – are reborn again and again as they aim to reach enlightenment. There is no escape, not even for a great priest in a temple or for a holy man who has nearly mastered his path, wears heavenly raiment, and flies through the sky. Except, that is, by achieving perfect buddhahood. No matter how praised one might be in this life, they could find themselves walking the path of a preta or animal in the next life. Of course, *I achieved buddhahood in a single life*, so I couldn't tell you if that refers to the physical soul or if it is some kind of metaphor."

"What do you mean?'

"You don't know? The world is divided into different categories: human, animal, deva, preta. But there is no path allowed for those like us who are known as Magic Gods. Yet we did not rise to this position through the normal means, so the gates of the Pure Land or of heaven will not open for us."

What did that mean the High Priest and the other Magic Gods wanted?

“A seventh path that is not contained by the six that already exist.”

The mummy continued without hiding anything.

“It can remain closed like a ring. It doesn’t matter if it is twisted like a Möbius strip. We simply want a category that contains us. When St. Germain instigated that boy named Aihana…or was it Kanou? Anyway, he brought up Excalibur, remember? This is similar. You could say we want a sheath to safely store the sword of such tremendous power.”

“…”

“No, that is limited to the human world. To put it on the level of a god, it might be better to call it Mímir’s head or the Scales of Anubis.”

“?”

“Was that too difficult for you? Basically, even the gods are said to have tools like scales or a compass that judge whether they are doing the right thing or not. And, Kamijou Touma, you may be that tool for us.”

It came out of nowhere, but the High Priest did not seem to be joking.

“I already said that we have no interest in the outside world. The different Magic Gods are fighting over the limited resources to decide what to do with the one and only world. Whether we peacefully talk it out or exchange blows, our actions could unintentionally shake destiny to the point that the outside world is destroyed. Even for us, there are areas where we do not know what should be done with the world and cannot tell where the world is headed. But what if we could provide a definite directional focus with a singular set of values?”

“Wait. You don’t mean…”

“Kamijou Touma, you are the one who stopped World War Three with a single fist and even worked out a compromise with the extreme irregularity known as Imagine Breaker. To be honest, it was a complete miscalculation that you saved Othinus ahead of time and reached an individual understanding of her, but you can do it, can’t you? Just like with that one-eyed god, you can use conversation to reach a conclusion with beings like us.”

“…”

Kamijou gradually caught on to what the High Priest was trying to say.

However, that understanding did not bring calm. In fact, it only brought a tense sweat and a racing pulse, as if he had been walking along blindfolded and was gradually realizing he was approaching the edge of a cliff.

“The gathering of Magic Gods known as Gremlin could also be called the keyboard connected to the world and to destiny. Simply having someone push or pull at it is enough to distort the current age. It isn’t an issue of any individual. We are all bringing about change. And we do so whether we continue forward or turn back. No, *even doing nothing affects it.*”

The High Priest smoothly spoke an unbelievable truth.

“That is why we want a canary in the coal mine. We wanted to set down our feet such that they would not cause anyone any trouble, but…oh? Have we truly not trampled on anyone and is everyone really equally happy? We need to know those answers from a smaller perspective, from one of the ants crawling on the earth.”

"I…can't believe that."

"We of course are not asking you to do it for free. If we leave the scoring to you, we can considerately make things easier for those close to you within acceptable bounds. This is much like a wish or a prayer with 100% chance of being granted. If you can freely control the distortions caused by the Magic Gods, you can achieve unlimited successes here in the real world. Hah hah. This sounds a lot like St. Germain's nonsense. The boy who was chosen by the sword becomes the king who controls all."

Kamijou Touma, who was constantly plagued with misfortune, would be able to control the world's destiny.

It was an ironic proposal.

It sounded like a bad joke.

"You mean," said Kamijou with a gulp. "Gremlin has no real interest in world domination. Nor do you intend to wipe out the human race. The Magic Gods living there will stay hidden away, living happily somewhere we're entirely unaware of. That's all you are?"

"Correct."

"And just by staying there, you influence our world, for better or for worse, so you want to do something about that. But what meaning is there in that for you Magic Gods? Why would you be worried about us humans?"

"We aren't. Not really. We have no more goals anymore. We just want to bring about our own version of happiness and live as we wish. This is only about a slight concern."

"?"

"You know in those…what do you call them? Net cafes? I recently learned about them, but it's like the security in those. Even if you know the odds of a problem are small, don't you still feel relieved when you see the 'no threats found' message pop up?"

"Relieved? That's all this is for!? You're talking about the Magic Gods possibly helping me and that's all it's about!?"

"That is also correct. It would be a problem if the 'no threats found' message was a complete lie, but anything else is fine. For example, if the security software itself takes over the memory and monitors all communications. We are willing to overlook such trivial matters to grant your selfish wishes. As I said before, this is a prayer that allows a human to interfere with the paths set by the gods. We may be weakened at the moment *due to certain circumstances*, but we can still likely create enough of a disturbance to save or destroy an individual, a nation, or a civilization. Do you understand now?"

That was all the High Priest said.

He was not making himself the king. He was a god placing a man on the throne.

"It seems St. Germain had partially decoded this much. He may have used pieces of it when lifting up that Kanou Shinka boy. But that is the extent of our goal. A certain sword once chose a king, St. Germain partially chose Kanou Shinka, and we have chosen you, Kamijou Touma. That said, there is no need to worry. We will not burden our scorer with the actions and responsibilities of a Magic God. We simply wish for the external evidence we need to rest easy. The same goes for the seventh path I mentioned earlier. I am not talking about some completely different realm. We simply want a formless sense of calm. It is nothing more than that."

"Why?"

"Why did we choose you, you mean? I am not saying anything you have done caught our eye. That is getting it all backwards."

"?"

"You might think the true Gremlin focused on you because you saved a girl, protected Academy City, ended World War Three, reached an understanding of Othinus, and brought calm back to a world boiling over with revenge. *…But isn't that backwards?*"

The mummy cackled.

"From the very beginning, you were the scorer meant to view the world. You were the being hypothesized by us Magic Gods who are the gears of the world. That is why you worked toward a resolution without being thrown off track during those aforementioned incidents. Imagine Breaker is merely an addition to your true nature. Or rather, as the wish of all magicians was wandering aimlessly, it was drawn in by your true nature. You could call it a trivial interference. The name Kamijou Touma, or the One who Purifies Gods and Slays Demons, was not given to the power of your right hand. It was given to you, wasn't it? Thus, the center of the issue is not the records of your past or the power in your right hand. It is you yourself."

It was a baffling suggestion, but it may have been something one could only accept without question once reaching the level of that mummy.

"It is not leaving our blade with your right hand that will allow us to rest easy. We are leaving it with your nature – your spirit – that befits the name of the One who Purifies Gods and Slays Demons. Human child, think back to your very first goal. You should easily be able to score and regulate the true Gremlin."

Was that right?

Or was it wrong?

Which was it here?

"And this is not a bad deal for you either," smoothly continued the High Priest. "I said before that the various world-shaking incidents had occurred within your reach, but how many people were injured or lost on the way to those conclusions? You completed everything from beginning to end, but have you ever scored a perfect 100 as you did so? …But if you score us and you alter the world as you wish, the distortions brought by us Magic Gods can change that.”

That was likely true.

He only had to think back to Othinus. A single Magic God had done so very much, but he was being told he would receive unconditional assistance from every Magic God in the history of the world. The puny boy’s prayers would be placed on the rails set up by the gods. And there were no side-effects and he did not have to give anything up in exchange. It would all be accomplished from some distant place. The High Priest had said something about being weakened, but what did that matter?

Mostly any incident would be over in a single second.

In fact, would any incidents be allowed to begin in the first place?

“You will be the security software that gives us peace of mind when you tell us there is no problem and you will gain control of memory. You will literally receive access to the power of the gods and to destiny.”

It was a decisive statement.

“By controlling those distortions, you will indirectly be able to mimic being a Magic God. Your world will belong to you and your influence can cover this world in which six or seven billion people live. You can eliminate any tragedy before it occurs, no hatred will ever grow, and you will live in a world where everyone is happy and fulfilled. After World War Three and the business with Othinus, you should already know your decisions can influence the world. There is no reason to think too hard about it. You can simply think of it as gaining the ultimate trump card for everything you…no, everything the entire Kamijou Faction has been doing.”

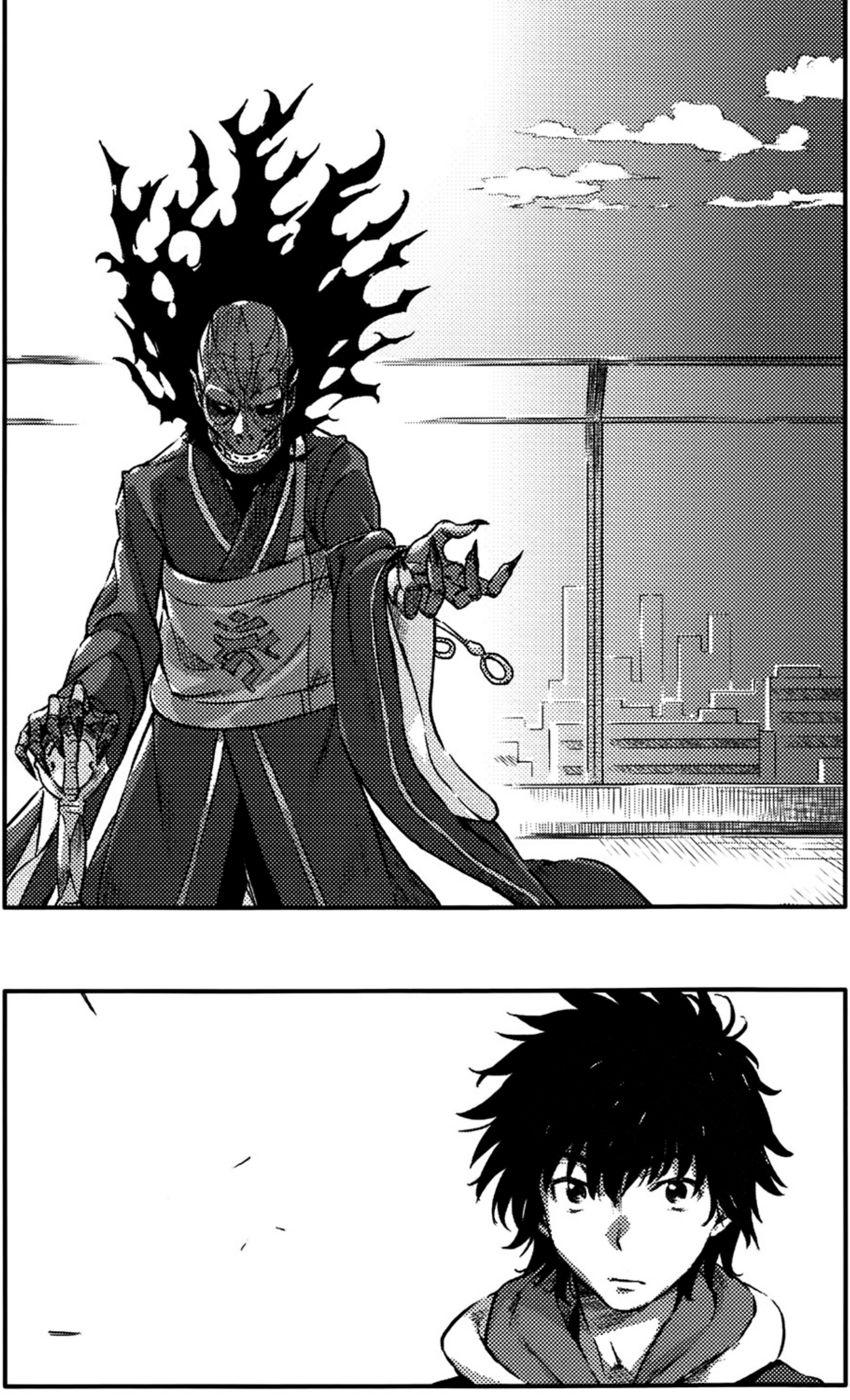
Kamijou thought about everything that had happened.

He had lost his memories and he had been killed by Othinus, but he had still made it this far. The world may have been blown to smithereens, but he had still continued on to this day. But just as the High Priest had said, could he really say he had ever scored a perfect 100?

How many smiles of the unsaved had he seen in Othinus’s golden world?

Had that proven that the power of a Magic God really could save all of them?

Terra of the Left had died. Kihara Kagun had not been stopped. There was also the incident with Yakumi Hisako and Rensa. What had happened to the girls named Mitsuari Ayu and Frenda *without his knowledge*?



He had been oblivious to some things and he had been deceived. He only had one body, swinging his two arms had not always been enough to reach someone, and it had been impossible to save absolutely everyone even if he took the shortest route from beginning to end.

But what if he could do that?

It did not matter if it was cheating. He could nip any disaster in the bud and resolve any incident before it began. What if that dream of an option lay before him?

To wish was to make a wish.

To pray was to rely on a god.

The Magic Gods had approached him and held out their hand. If that truly was all this was…

"Now."

The High Priest reached out his dried hand as if hoping for a handshake.

"Become our scorer and obtain the altar of the Magic Gods, Kamijou Touma."

In response, the boy looked the High Priest directly in the eye and gave his answer.

"No."

The mummy's hand remained in empty air.

He could be their scorer.

He could be the sheath for the ultimate sword.

An altar had been created for him, giving him the controls to the world, but Kamijou Touma rejected it all.

"What you're talking about is no different from the happy world Othinus showed me in the very, very end. It may look perfect at first glance, but it's really a reign of terror that forces your own values on everyone else. It's no different from saying you can be happy in solitary confinement because they give you clothes, food, and shelter."

"…Oh?"

"And your entire suggestion is based on the idea that people will end up fighting if you leave them be. You think that conflict needs to be eliminated ahead of time."

Kamijou threw his words at the mummy.

"Who says that's how it works? Maybe people won't cause any major incidents without something out of the ordinary kicking it all off. Are you still going to monitor them 24/7/365 and crush them if they do anything that looks remotely suspicious? Even though they might have been sneaking around in the shadows to surprise their lover with a birthday present? That's just going to cause new reasons for conflict! High Priest, what you're suggesting is no different from burning people like straw and then stomping the fire out underfoot. How is that any different from an arsonist firefighter!?"

"Are you really claiming people are essentially good *after everything you've seen*? This is a little too unique to just call naïve, but that is exactly why I want you as our sheath and scorer. Perhaps it is exactly because you are not eager to accept that you are perfect for what we want."

The High Priest actually seemed to be enjoying this turn of events.

"But this will not change the end result."

"Are you saying I'll change my mind?"

"Yes. It is merely a matter of sooner or later. Will you catch on before or after losing something? Isn't that right? After rejecting our offer, you are sure to try to resolve the next incident that occurs. And that remains true whether you are aware of it or not. So will you fight the old-fashioned way and create needless damage or will you reach for the cheat codes right away and end it all with no one hurt? …The path you take may be a little different, but you will find yourself in the same place in the end. You will resolve the incident. The question is how many will have died along the way."

"…"

"That is why I find it somewhat baffling why you would not take my hand. You stand before the path to a future where no one has died and everyone is smiling together, so why would you intentionally choose the path of death? And I am talking about the lives of those around you, not your own life."

He already knew that, but he still felt dizzy.

This was a question unique to a Magic God. He had faced the same question in Othinus's happy world. When faced with the ultimate paradise that seemed impossible for a single individual to achieve, his fragile mind had been swept away all too easily. That was what it meant to face a god.

But he could not let himself be deceived.

Back then, the Will had told him that there was a distortion even in that happy world where everyone seemed to have been saved. The puny human's only weapons may have been selfishness and a desire to have things for himself, but he had been saved by the fact that people will risk their lives for worthless things like that.

When looking at the number of lives, the High Priest may have been right.

But his method stripped away everything but the lives. People could easily become puppets when faced with destiny. It was no different from shoving all six or seven billion people into a prison, giving them clothing, food, and shelter, and saying you had created an ideal society with no inequality, starvation, or poverty.

That might be ideal for the person grinning down from above.

It might be ideal for the puppeteer amusing himself by controlling the people desperately struggling from day to day.

If it continued for a century or two, it was possible no one would question it anymore. It would be just like goldfish that had been selectively bred to the point that they could not live in natural rivers. And if they did not question it, they might be satisfied with that twisted environment and they might think they were happy.

Index would, Misaka Mikoto would, Kazakiri Hyouka would, and Othinus would.

Everyone would, even if they did not meet the normal definition of human.

They would accept that happiness with a smile even though everything from the past had been rejected and even though they would die if they were thrown out of their aquarium of artificially supplied oxygen and thorough heat management.

But…

“I can’t allow that…”

“…”

This may have been an illogical, inefficient, and meaningless complaint.

It may have been an imperfect and incomplete issue with no benefits whatsoever.

But whether he should unconditionally throw it out was another issue entirely.

For one thing, he had not clenched his teeth, formed a fist, and ran forward with all his might because he had wanted to make some kind of change.

He had wanted to preserve his unchanging days.

He had not wanted anything unnecessary.

He would have been satisfied getting along with the others while smiles were the norm and without anything being taken away for some absurd reason.

The High Priest was talking about ruling and managing the world, but even if that was a peaceful thing, it would only overturn the "normality" Kamijou Touma wanted.

He did not want to turn Index, Misaka Mikoto, and the others close to him into decorative tropical fish.

He did not need a wish or a prayer.

There were other ways to protect what was important.

"High Priest, I won't go with you. It doesn't matter how much power you'll unconditionally lend me, I just can't allow that future. And if anyone can give you what you want as long as they have what it takes to be your scorer, then I can't just ignore this."

"Meaning?"

"You said I could end any disaster before it began, but unfortunately, you look like a disaster-in-the-making to me. I can't just ignore it when someone is willing to lend out enough power to rule the world!!"

After all, Kamijou Touma knew what that meant.

He had seen a Magic God's power for himself.

He had seen it from alpha to omega.

That had not been a dream or an illusion. He truly had seen the long, long history of everything mankind had built up come crumbling down at the whim of a god. Knowing a Magic God was coming to destroy the world with that power was frightening enough, but it was even worse for them to hand that power over just because they were not interested in this world. Who could say who would take control of six or seven billion people for their own view of happiness. It was even possible all of those people would become dolls who did not even know they were being controlled.

"Hm. This is certainly a problem."

The High Priest tilted his head with a dry cracking sound.

He looked like he was watching someone who did not know the rules make a ridiculous move in a game of go.

He seemed truly baffled as to how Kamijou had reached that conclusion.

"I already told you, didn't I? It is a matter of sooner or later, of before or after you lose something."

A moment later, something burst out from empty air beyond the metal fence behind the High Priest. They looked like two large trees quickly flying upwards, but they were not.

They were made of dirt or mud.

They almost looked like wings placed over the High Priest's silhouette, but they were probably arms.

It may have been to match Kamijou's right hand.

The High Priest sighed and tapped the rooftop floor with his golden sword.

"*I truly cannot understand why you would choose to wait until after you have lost something.*"

"…!!!???"

All of Kamijou's hair bristled in alarm.

Something like a surge of electricity ran down his spine.

But it was too late.

One of the colossal arms swung down.

It did not hesitate to crush half of the school building made of reinforced concrete.

Kamijou's vision and hearing were blown away.

He could not believe the sight before his eyes.

The sound of something hard crumbling sounded horribly far away. The sudden outcome was less like a bomb exploding and more like stepping on the edge of a candy box sitting on the ground. However, there would have been hundreds of students and teachers inside that box.

The High Priest spoke disinterestedly as he stood on the edge of the broken rooftop with exposed rebar hanging from the edge like willow branches.

"Not enough red. I see. That orientation thing is going on."

(? Oh, I get it. They were all chasing after Tsuchimikado and me, so were they all gathered to one side of the building? That means they might not all be dead yet!!)

On a normal day of classes, the students would have been evenly crushed in their seats laid out like the boxes on graph paper.

But…

“Not that it matters. If I swing down the other arm, I can crush the other half of the building. There will be no second miracle, boy.”

The High Priest crushed even that slight hope.

No, it was too obvious. He had probably intentionally set it up this way.

He was trying to shake Kamijou Touma’s resolve.

“Do you honestly think you can save them all with only Imagine Breaker? If so, you can reach an understanding after losing them. It is a matter of sooner or later. If you had taken my hand sooner and relied on the gods, this tragedy could have been avoided.”

With those words, the other giant arm began to move.

The rest of the school would be crushed like a candy box and hundreds of people really would be killed.

And all to rob Kamijou of the small world he pictured in his head.

The boy did indeed feel a fine, fine line burning into his mind.

“High Priiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeesssssssssssssssttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttttt!!”

Just before the giant arm of mud and dirt finished swinging down, Kamijou Touma ran straight toward the High Priest.

However, he did not clench his right fist and try to smash the mummy’s face in. The High Priest had already asked if he honestly thought he could save them all with only Imagine Breaker.

That was why Kamijou relied on something else.

He lowered his hips, hit the High Priest with his shoulder, and threw his entire body weight into him.

He did not hesitate to throw himself past the broken metal fence and off of the four story rooftop.

The sound of his feet kicking off the surface only seemed to reach him a second later.

For a brief moment, he felt like he was floating.

The threads of gravity soon captured him again and he felt the heavy force of inertia weighing down on his gut. He was beginning to fall. He had grabbed the High Priest's light body so very tightly, but the mummy slipped from his grasp.

He did not even have time to scream.

A few trees grew alongside the school building. He collided with one of them, a ginkgo tree that had lost all of its leaves. He heard several branches breaking and his descent was slowed in exchange for some scrapes. Still, he did not come to a complete stop and he slammed into the ground.

"G-gbah!! Cough, cough!?"

He felt like someone had taken a saw to all of his skin, but the trouble breathing was even worse. No oxygen entered his body no matter how much he coughed and darkness quickly narrowed his vision. He still desperately worked at breathing and felt like a plug had come out deep in his throat. He coughed a large clump of dark red on the dirt and finally felt oxygen filling his lungs.

He reached for the tree trunk and slowly stood up while forcing his twitching eyelids to open.

(Where's…the High…Priest?)

They had not fallen in the same spot since he had let go of the mummy in midair.

That meant the High Priest’s momentum had not been slowed by the tree and he would have fallen directly to the ground.

However…

“Heh…heh heh.”

Kamijou Touma saw an old man in a purple robe slowly stand up on the schoolyard several meters away.

But something was not right.

The mummy’s dried neck had completely broken and his head was lying horizontally. It shook as he moved, so it was reminiscent of a fruit still on the branch after it had rotted too much for even the birds to touch it.

And yet he was still laughing.

He truly seemed to be enjoying himself.

“Kah kah! Kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah!!”

He used his dried hands to support his shaking head and casually twisted it back into place. He showed no sign of feeling pain or of fearing the destruction of his body.

He was different.

He was bizarre.

(This is hopeless…)

Kamijou deduced that via intuition rather than reason.

“Ahh, ahh. It has been far too long since I felt something like this. Who would have thought losing so much power and being made imperfect would feel so refreshing? I should probably thank ‘him’ for this.”

It had been the same with Othinus.

When she had used her crossbow in that pitch-black world, she had killed Kamijou Touma by piercing through herself along with him.

(This isn’t normal. I’ve seen plenty of nearly immortal people, but this is completely different. This isn’t a kind of defense that makes him immortal. After being so badly damaged, he’s actually *enjoying* that he was damaged for the first time in so long!!!???)

This was no time to sit around listening to him.

A single right fist was not enough to defeat him. Sticking around would only get the others at the school caught up in it all. And if they were captured by the High Priest, it would only be a matter of time before they were incorporated into that scorer nonsense.

He pictured the faces of Index, Misaka Mikoto, and all the others close to him.

He imaged a horrible conclusion where they were essentially thrown into an oxygen-supplied and heat-controlled aquarium and made into decorative tropical fish.

(I can’t let that happen!!)

He made up his mind quickly.

The High Priest was only interested in him.

(I need to draw him away from here. I can’t let him destroy the school any further with those huge mud arms. And once I do that, I need a more fundamental solution to this Magic God!!)

“Over here, High Priest!! C’mon!!”

He spun around to turn his back and he took off running. He had no idea where his goal was, but he had to lead the High Priest away.

“Kah kah!! It is merely a matter of sooner or later, but are you that intent on putting it off until later!? That’s fine, though. I will go along with your games, our sheath and our scorer. You will become our as-yet unseen seventh path and the physical form of our formless peace of mind. My power as a Magic God is currently limited and I only retain one thin layer of the power piled up like the infinite layers of an onion or matryoshka doll. But infinitely dividing that infinite power still leaves me with enough power to just barely be contained in this world!!!!!”

Kamijou did not have time to respond to everything he heard behind him.

He ran.

He ran with all his might.

He just about tripped over the cracks in the sidewalk’s asphalt caused by the previous attack. Instead of the front gate, he ran to the parking lot to the side of the school. Kamijou usually walked to school, but on this day, he knew he could find the acrobike that Komoe-sensei had overzealously prepared for them.

The back wheel was locked, but he easily broke the lock by stomping on it a few times.

He pulled out a type of electrically assisted bicycle, but it did not have a basket on the front for shopping. It was based on a mountain bike, there were special gyros on either side of the wheels, and most of the metal frame had thick suspension attached.

It was an acrobike.

Its predecessors had been used for tricks at circuses and the like, but its electrical assistance gave it a top speed of fifty kph and the springs of its suspension allowed it to jump higher than two meters. However, Kamijou was not exactly an expert at using it. He had only read the documents Komoe-sensei had provided and watched some amazing tricks performed on video sites.

He frantically climbed onto the bicycle and prepared to leave the school, but he was interrupted.

“Ah! What happened to you!? You’re all beat up!!”

“Misaka, what are you doing here?”

“Were you hurt in that accidental collapse just now!? Mutter, mutter (M-my Railgun didn’t cause that, did it? This makes it hard to ask about that love letter.)”

Kamijou immediately looked away from her.

On the schoolyard, the High Priest’s dry skin split apart. He was prepared to rush in at any moment. Kamijou had no idea how fast the mummy was, but he immediately knew he could not get his hopes up about that.

There was no time to explain the situation.

“Dammit. Get on the back, Misaka!!”

“Eh? What?”

“I’ll explain later. At this rate, you’ll be taken out, too!!”

There was no signal gun to indicate the beginning of the race.

To check on the acrobike’s abilities and to build up his initial speed, Kamijou tried one of the cycle arts he had seen in a video while bored.

(I lock the front wheel, pedal as hard as I can, place the back wheel on the ground, and release the brakes to unleash the power!!)

“Wah!!”

This was the R Dash.

The acrobike was released with tremendous speed, just like an arrow fired from a drawn bow.

To escape the Magic God known as the High Priest, Kamijou and Mikoto shot toward the school's main gate on the electrically-assisted acrobike.

Cycle Arts Collection 1

Tightrope

Difficulty: 2

Using the acrobike for tightrope walking. Includes everything from literally crossing a rope to using guardrails, railings, or other narrow surfaces. It looks tricky, but it is not actually very difficult since it almost entirely relies on the gyros. Using slanted surfaces like the railings of stairs or escalators goes by another name.

Sliding

Difficulty: 2

A cycle art using the gyro functionality. First, pedal like normal to build up speed. Turn the handlebars perpendicular to your direction of movement, tilt yourself in the opposite direction of your movement, and continue forward with the acrobike tilted at over fifty degrees. The trick is to go all out in turning the handlebars. And be careful because tilting the acrobike too far will scrape your leg against the ground.

R Dash

Difficulty: 1

Probably the easiest cycle art. Keep the front wheel locked and pedal with all your might. After accumulating energy between the back wheel and the ground, unlock the front wheel and make an intense start dash. Instead of using it on its own, this cycle art is meant to be the initial action in preparation for other cycle arts. It can build up speed without needing a lengthy approach, so it can lead to some surprisingly high-level tricks.

Between the Lines 1

Buddhist self-mummification seems like a truly unique form of achieving buddhahood.

A Buddhist priest digs into the dirt to create a small underground room and then climbs inside of his own free will. Afterwards, he completely fills in the one exit except for an opening to allow air in. Until the final moment, he meditates, rings a small bell, and chants sutras. That is more or less the process.

As a method of creating mummies, there is nothing all that special about it.

Buddhist self-mummification is a method of testing one’s faith and ensuring it does not waver even in a crisis.

And that is why there is actually one final and uninteresting step to the Buddhist self-mummification.

A few weeks or months after the beginning of the ceremony, when the priest inside will clearly have passed away, the other priests dig back up that underground entrance.

Then they check on him.

They inspect the thoroughly dried-up corpse of the priest. Is there any fear of death or pain of hunger in his posture or expression? Has anywhere crumbled or decayed even slightly? Only after their perfection has been confirmed is the priest considered to have achieved buddhahood.

That raises a question, though.

What if his buddhahood is not accepted?

Simply put, he does not achieve buddhahood. He is treated like the corpse of a failure.

But do a few dozen lower priests who have not achieved enlightenment really have a way of accurately checking whether a higher priest has achieved enlightenment or not?

And in an age when the government and religion were closely linked, there was also the issue of factions. Based on the influence between different factions, some would interfere because it would be a problem for the other faction's priest to achieve buddhahood.

Yes.

Buddhahood through self-mummification cannot be completed by the priest himself. Possessing power is not the condition needed to achieve buddhahood. It includes a roundabout system in which it is only complete once the others watching on have "accepted" it.

You might not want to believe it, but at times, some might have secretly paid bribes to ensure a certain priest did not achieve buddhahood no matter what.

What if there was an old man who really should have achieved buddhahood?

What if those around him stubbornly refused to accept it?

Now.

If this priest had gained the "power" that came with successful self-mummification but was not accepted as a buddha, just what kind of being would he have become?

Chapter 2: Run, or Die — Chase_With_the_Girl.

Part 1

Kamijou drove toward the school's main gate with Mikoto on the back seat. Instead of straddling the seat like you were supposed to, Mikoto sat in a more ladylike sideways style, but this was not just because she had an understanding of elegance.

It was harder to balance, but she could check behind them without having to twist around. That would give her a better chance of fighting back against the mysterious old man (Is that what he was?) pursuing from behind.

The thick sliding chain-link gate was closed, but Kamijou pushed his weight down on the acrobike and used the electronically-controlled suspension springs to send the bicycle leaping upwards. This was the cycle art known as the Jumper and it allowed them to clear the gate in no time at all. The ridiculously thick documentation Komoe-sensei had handed out proved useful after all.

However, this was no time to be appreciating that fact.

"Hold on, Misaka!!"

They landed with ferocious speed and were about to run into the wall on the opposite side. They did not have time to make a drifting turn.

The girl's arms tightened as they held on around his waist.

Kamijou completely locked the front wheel, lifted up the back wheel and the back seat Mikoto sat on, and twisted the entire acrobike around on the locked front wheel. This was the Flail Turn and it was used to make a turn with almost no lost circular distance.

Even as an amateur, Kamijou had pulled it off without toppling over, but that was testament to the acrobike's specs, not to his own skill.

The front wheel let out a scream and they safely made the turn. Then they raced forward again.

A brief moment later, the thick gate was blasted outward even though it had to weigh several hundred kilograms.

The almost explosive sound of destruction came from more than just the gate being broken. The flying piece of metal collided with and embedded itself in the back of a truck driving down the road.

And it did not end there.

"Uho hoi☆"

The purple-robed mummy gave a joking cry as he ran through the destroyed gate. His brakes must not have been working because he also slammed right into the back of the truck. He broke all the way through, burst out into the opposite lane, and made the turn with the ground audibly scraping away beneath his feet.

A sports car drove straight toward him in the opposite lane, but he used a single hand to toss it aside and into the wall.

He ignored it all and continued his pursuit of Kamijou and Mikoto.

He easily ignored the limits of his dried mummy's body. The dried skin split as he ran full speed with the form of a sprinter.

"He's messing with us!!!!"

With the help of the electric motor, Kamijou pedaled the acrobike with all his might. Its top speed was over fifty kph, but their distance from the High Priest was not growing. It was unclear whether he was taking this seriously or not. In fact, Kamijou doubted there were any obvious conditions for victory in a battle against a Magic God. Even now, he felt like the mummy was just having some fun.

It was like an elementary school teacher challenging his students to a back hip circle contest to show the children how amazing he was in a way they would understand.

Was this fight simply to make Kamijou understand the situation?

Kamijou also felt Misaka Mikoto had to be utterly bewildered after being caught up in this so suddenly. Even if she would not know this was the work of magic or a Magic God, it would not be surprising for her to have given up trying to understand when an obvious mummy was chasing them while knocking aside cars.

Curious, he focused on her as she wrapped her arms around his torso from behind.

"(Wow… We're on a bike together. I'm riding a bike with a boy! Eh? Eh? What's going on here? This isn't a drama and it isn't a movie. O-oh, no. If I'd known this was going to happen, I'd definitely have worn a white dress. Ahh…)"

"Um, Misaka-san?"

"Ah!!!???"

Mikoto had been speaking her strange ramblings aloud, but she rebooted a moment later.

"Ny-nyothing!! And what is that thing!? Is it alive or is it a stuffed animal with a robot skeleton inside!?"

"It's probably alive. But getting caught by it is a really bad idea!!"

Even if the anti-crime orientation was underway, they were lucky it was a weekday.

Eighty percent of Academy City's residents were some kind of student.

Even if the city streets were their stage, the odds were much lower that anyone else would be caught up in all this as the High Priest pursued them.

Mikoto tried to understand the situation using the severely inadequate information available to her.

First, she looked behind them.

“So that’s the enemy.”

“Right.”

“He’s trying to harm us.”

“I think that’s pretty obvious!”

“Then what exactly are we going to do!? If we do nothing, he’ll harm us, but if we keep running around, there’s a chance some unrelated people will get caught in the middle!!”

“!!”

(Yeah, that’s right, dammit. We have to do something!!)

Kamijou clenched his teeth and made a right-angle turn onto a smaller road. He then took another right-angle turn into an alley. He made more and more turns. He barely lost any speed, created burning friction as the tires slid along the ground, and raced through what was more of a gap than an actual pathway.

But…

“He’s still following us! This isn’t enough to lose him!”

“Not good,” muttered Kamijou.

They were moving at about sixty kph. That might not sound like much compared to Saints who could break the sound barrier, but Kamijou felt an unpleasant sweat seeping from his back.

The two could not be compared so simply.

In fact, one way of looking at it made the High Priest far more frightening.

It was true a Saint’s athletic ability was a threat. They truly did live in the same world as bullets and could dodge one after seeing it flying through the air. In a head-to-head confrontation, there was no way Kamijou could beat them with the physical strength of a high school boy. That was like a barrier in his way.

But at the same time, Saints were *too* powerful.

One could say that they were at the mercy of their own strength.

They could achieve supersonic speeds with their own body, so what would happen if someone set up piano wire and escaped using countless sharp turns? It might not apply to all Saints, but at least a few of them would self-destruct by decapitating themselves or flattening themselves against a wall. The Saints pushed themselves and pushed themselves further to draw out their strength, so using their physical bodies to their fullest was a way of triggering their own self-destruction. It almost made one suspect that the greatest threat to a Saint was their own strength and not some external enemy.

But…

“Ho ho.”

Ridiculous laughter reached them from behind.

“Uho hoi☆”

The High Priest showed no sign of pushing himself and pushing himself further. Kamijou was turning corner after corner and choosing all the narrowest paths to make him self-destruct, but he made all the turns accurately and pursued them just as accurately. That was what frightened Kamijou the most.

There was a slight difference here.

Saints drew out incredible power from their human body, but Magic Gods had taken a step away from having a human body.

“I guess this isn’t gonna cut it. We can’t just wait for him to self-destruct! Do we have to attack him!?”

“Attack? But how are we supposed to-…kyah!?”

The tires slid across the ground and the acrobike left the narrow alley and returned to the main road.

Kamijou glanced around, took a wider view as if taking a step back, and made up his mind.

He could move in all 360 degrees.

But with the acrobike, his freedom of movement was not limited to the ground.

“Hold on, Misaka!!”

He intentionally pressed down with his weight and the electronically-controlled suspension sank deep down.

He used the reaction to jump.

He jumped four or five meters straight up and his eyes met with a young man working on a window-washer’s platform.

“Sorry, but I’ll be borrowing this!!”

Kamijou took the bucket the surprised young man had been using and dumped the cleaning solution across the street below.

The acrobike landed at pretty much the same time as the High Priest left the narrow alleyway.

“Ho-…”

His laughter grew distorted.

His feet slipped as he made the sharp turn to continue pursuit.

“Ho hooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooooo!?”

He fell onto his side and tumbled from the sidewalk to the road. It all happened in an instant once he lost his balance. He rolled along the file-like asphalt with tremendous speed, as if being pulled by an invisible wire.

If it had occurred in a school hallway, it might have been funny.

However, it was happening here at sixty kph. This was no different from being dragged along the road with your clothing caught on the bottom of a truck.

An unpleasant scraping noise continued for quite some time.

The High Priest's dried body flew to the opposite lane and collided with an illegally parked sports car. The impact was powerful enough to bend the metal door, cover the glass with cracks, and trigger the shrill car alarm.

Kamijou threw on the acrobike's brakes and twisted around to check behind him.

"Did that get him!?"

Even as he said that, he was aware of another point of view rationally observing his heart.

It was telling him this was an empty and weightless desire.

It was telling him he knew the truth deep down.

No one equal to or more powerful than Othinus would be taken out by a trick like that.

A great noise exploded out.

Instead of dislodging himself from the door, the High Priest lifted the entire sports car overhead using one of those giant mud arms.

The arm acted just like an arm.

It threw the mass of metal toward Kamijou and Mikoto like it was just a brick.

“Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhh!?”

Kamijou frantically turned the handlebars, quickly pedaled the bike, and somehow managed to escape the giant fast ball.

In what looked like some kind of joke, the purple-robed High Priest formed the crouching pose of a runner.

Then the giant arm roared in behind him.

It placed itself below the High Priest’s very first step and launched the dried mummy horizontally like a frighteningly primitive catapult.

The concept of distance meant nothing.

It was all compressed in an instant.

To move even a little bit further away, Kamijou turned his back and tried to race onward. Mikoto was still sitting sideways behind him.

However, the High Priest instantly shot by over her head and performed a side flip to rotate around in midair. It looked more like a way to orient himself than to reduce his momentum.

With a very light sound, his feet landed right in the middle of the acrobike’s T-shaped handlebars.

“Wha-!?”

“Ho ho. Is that all you have, Kamijou Touma?”

He used his golden sword instead of a staff.

He may have had no intent of stabbing Kamijou with it, but its sharp point was still swaying right in front of the boy’s face.

“Then I suppose it is time to harvest the-…”

It was more than just a whim that led the High Priest to stop speaking.

In this hopeless situation, Kamijou had begun pedaling the acrobike with all his might and quickly produced speeds on the level of a motorcycle.

But that was not enough to shake off a Magic God.

The real reason he had stopped speaking was much more obvious.

With an almost comical noise, the back of his head collided with an electronic sign jutting out from a multi-tenant building.

Ironically, it was the very fact that he was a Magic God that allowed this to be laughed off as harmless.

With a surprise attack at this speed, a normal human's head would have been split open if not torn clean off. The same could be said of a Saint.

The sign's neon tubes burst, scattering brilliant sparks everywhere. The High Priest wobbled and then fell from the acrobike. This time, Kamijou did not foolishly ask if that had done it. Instead, he pedaled with all his might.

"Dammit. What are we going to do? We'll just be summoning that monster to wherever we run to, so what do we do now!?"

"Hey, wait! Look!!"

Mikoto seemed to be pointing at something while pressing up against his back.

Kamijou caught on only after twisting around, seeing where she was pointing, and looking in that direction.

By then, several special vehicles had already passed by the acrobike on either side.

"Anti-Skill!? Those idiots!!"

He brought the acrobike to a sudden stop as he shouted out.

A moment later, a far-too reckless clash between human and Magic God began.

Part 2

"Withdraw!? What are you talking about!? I just got here! Target D1 is right in front of me!!"

Just as the first group rushed in, an Anti-Skill member who had arrived a little late shouted angrily into his vehicle's radio. He felt so dizzy by what he was hearing that he parked on the curb to focus on the conversation.

"Those are our orders," said his commander over the radio. "It seems we don't have enough firepower with us. I don't like it either, but orders are orders!! Did you hear that, Shiosai!!"

"I can't accept that. We've already received reports of the damage D1 has caused. How can we do nothing when we know how dangerous-..."

He trailed off because of a shadow.

At first the Anti-Skill member named Shiosai was unable to comprehend the sight before his eyes. No, his mind was rejecting it and giving up.

Several special vehicles had rushed in at their target.

They had carried quite a few well-equipped Anti-Skill members.

But not one of them escaped.

It looked like a toy cracker bursting.

Everything was blown in every direction so easily that none of the metal and composite armor seemed to have any weight.

Shiosai stared blankly for a moment, but he knew what that shadow was.

It was an identical model of special vehicle flying toward him in a parabolic arc.

“Waaaaah!?”

He frantically opened the driver’s side door and tumbled out. The other vehicle hit a moment later. His waxed and sparkling vehicle was crushed, all of the glass shattered, and its original form was lost. The other vehicle stabbed vertically through it like a gravestone.

It was surprising the vehicle did not explode.

Shiosai was in a daze, but he heard his commander’s (surprisingly calm given the situation) voice coming from the vehicle’s radio that seemed to still be functioning.

“Can you hear me, Shiosai! Withdraw! Did you get that!? We’re going to respond to D1 with an unmanned unit made up of HsAFH-11s and HsWAV-15s!! If you don’t want to spread the damage, then fall back!!”

“The Six Wings and the Ten Legs?”

Shiosai shuddered.

Like having a half-healed scab peeled off, the situation dawned on him.

“Those are meant for war!! What is that old man!?”

There was of course no answer.

Instead, several unmanned attack helicopters flew through the blue sky as if to mock his obsolete physical labor. Several problem-control armored vehicles passed by Shiosai. Instead of just heavy machineguns, those vehicles had tank-like turrets attached on top.

But even all that was not enough.

The deep explosion sounded almost empty. The thoroughly-calculated optimal destruction was crushed by something greater and more hopeless. First, a tower-like arm burst from the earth, lifted up an armored vehicle like a toy car, and threw it. Sparks flew through the air near one of the Six Wings and it seemed to take some kind of defensive action, but there was nothing it could do against such a primitive form of attack. The vehicle collided with it and they both fell intertwined to the ground.

One after another, those optimal weapons were crushed, brought down, or blown up.

Shiosai felt the overwhelming insanity before him further peeling away the scab on his heart.

The color white flashed through the back of his mind.

He recalled the snowy plains of Russia.

During the battle known as World War Three, he had seen similar insanity that the official side of science was helpless against.

(Oh.)

When he compared the two, all strength left his body.

His hips gave out.

He had realized the truth.

(Has this city truly entered an age of war?)

At that moment, an acrobike passed by with enough speed to rip apart Shiosai's resignation.

"High Priiiiiiiiiiiiiiieeeeeeeeeeeeeeessssssssstttttttttttttttttt!!"

Someone yelled at the top of their lungs.

Kamijou's mind was boiling over.

It may have been misdirected. It may have been strange to get angry at this.

But with the High Priest's power, he should have been able to settle this peacefully. Regardless, he had intentionally chosen violence. He had chosen it, kicked them about, and mocked them.

Anti-Skill's special vehicles had been *stabbed through* and the unmanned attack helicopters and armored vehicles had been kicked about like toys in some hellish sandbox.

One of the helicopters had not exploded after falling to the surface and its rotor was flailing wildly like a pinwheel firework. It was a step away from ripping apart some injured Anti-Skill members like a juicer, but Kamijou made a large leap with the acrobike.

He jumped over the attack helicopter rampaging across the ground.

Mikoto controlled magnetism to redirect the helicopter. The rotor spun rapidly at only ten centimeter intervals, but it missed the collapsed Anti-Skill members and passed by next to them.

Meanwhile, Kamijou held a thick wire in his hand.

He had borrowed it from the side of a crushed armored vehicle. As soon as he landed, he threw the end toward the High Priest so it would loosely wrap around the mummy's neck.

"Nh?"

Gravity took care of the rest.

The wire had drawn a gentle, sloping arc along the path Kamijou had taken, but now it fell right on top of the still-raging attack helicopter that Mikoto had just barely shifted out of the way.

The rotor and wire came into contact.

Orange sparks flew.

“Nhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

In a certain southeastern Asian country, there was a form of torture known as “The Helicopter”.

As its name suggested, the victim’s hands were tied together and attached to the end of a helicopter rotor. Then, the engine was revved higher and higher. It was a rare form of torture that took advantage of centrifugal force, but it was difficult to control and it was common for the victim to die before they could provide the necessary information.

However, the cruelty was further increased here.

After all, this helicopter was lying on its side.

On each quick rotation, the High Priest’s dried body was slammed into the asphalt and then flung up into the sky before he could even feel the pain.

The intense thrashing only left him visible as an afterimage and the scene was almost comical in an inappropriate way.

However, not even this was enough for Kamijou to feel even a fragment of relief.

He shouted to the Anti-Skill members on the ground.

“This is dangerous, so get back!!”

“Eh? Oh…”

The Anti-Skill members may have thought he meant they would be caught up in the rotating rotor and wire, but the next thing he said destroyed that common way of thinking.

“That isn’t enough to kill that High Priest…that Magic God!!”

"S-s-s-s-s-s-s-so you understand-and-and-and-and-and."

This was not quite the Doppler Effect. The reply had a silly ring to it like a small child speaking into a fan.

However, no one was going to laugh at this.

They were faced with a threat that could treat this much violence like a joke.

Some of the Anti-Skill members' eyes rolled back in their head and they fainted.

Kamijou honestly felt that staying there would be dangerous for everyone.

"C'mon, High Priest!!"

"Ho hoiiiii!! But of course!! Now, let us fight! It is time you got to know another Magic God! But don't worry. Once it is all over and the distance between us has dropped to zero, you will be a part of us and become our scorer!!"

As Kamijou resumed his serious flight on the acrobike, the High Priest tore apart the attack helicopter's rotor, swung the wire around, and threw the rotor like a hunting boomerang.

It was not over yet.

This was only the beginning.

(Friction doesn't work, busting his head open with a sign doesn't work, Anti-Skill's bullets and shells don't work, and strapping him to a helicopter rotor and slamming him into the ground at over 1000 rpm doesn't do a thing!! It all seems so surreal, but I guess a Magic God really is a Magic God. Even a Saint or member of God's Right Seat tries to protect themselves from an attack coming their way. Even the #1 deflects the attacks. But this guy doesn't do anything to defend himself! So how am I supposed to reach his level!?)

Unfortunately, Kamijou did not have a trump card to use here.

That was when Mikoto spoke to him from the back seat.

“Hey, wait! Hey!”

“What is it, Misaka!?”

“I get that this is some abnormal monster. I get that he’s after us and that ignoring him is bad news! But I have a suggestion!!”

“Which is!?”

“We have another abnormal monster right here!!”

“W-wait, you don’t mean…! Don’t be stupid!!”

“We can’t just run away. We have to fight. We have to do what we can to stop him here!!”

Kamijou felt the girl’s arms slip from around his waist, but there was nothing he could do. Unlike with a car, a bicycle or motorcycle generally required the cooperation of the person in the back seat.

There was nothing he could do if she chose to hop off herself.

Her hips rose from the seat and she left the acrobike as casually as stepping down from a swing. The soles of her leather shoes pressed down on the asphalt that seemed to be scrolling by below. She may have been using her power to help because she forcefully came to a stop quite quickly.

She turned around and prepared to attack the High Priest.

“Dammit!!”

Kamijou clicked his tongue and frantically performed a Flail Turn to bring the acrobike to a stop and turn 180 degrees. He was staring in the opposite direction from before.

Mikoto seemed to understand that this was not a normal enemy. She did not use a lightning spear or iron sand sword as a warning and skipped straight to pulling out an arcade coin.

She was using her Railgun.

This attack was her namesake. The cruel attack produced unequaled destruction by firing a piece of metal at three times the speed of sound. The friction of the air was so great that the coin itself would melt into orange and vaporize after traveling fifty meters.

But as soon as the High Priest swung his dried arm horizontally, the unleashed strike was deflected directly to the side.

“Wha-…!?”

Mikoto was dumfounded, but Kamijou did not look at all surprised.

Before even thinking about winning, it was miraculous enough to be having a fight with a true Magic God in the first place.

The High Priest did not even stop running.

He had deflected a true Railgun blast as casually as shooing away a fly. One of the reinforced concrete buildings lining the road broke from its base and approached the road.

Another tree-like arm of mud grew behind the mummy.

It broke out through the asphalt and grabbed the building.

He did not use it for defense.

“Ah.”

Just as Mikoto tried to say something, the twenty-story building was swung down like a tree branch.

Part 3

When an explosive noise crossed a certain line, it actually brought silence.

It was like an intense roar blowing out the small flames crackling here and there. It was like a swollen star losing to its own gravity, exploding, and forming a black hole.

Existence that brought worry and hesitation would lead to nothingness when it grew too large.

This was the realm of impermanence.

It was the Buddhist path to enlightenment that the High Priest had walked.

"…Hm."

A nearby crosswalk continuously emitted a cuckoo's cry to warn the visually impaired.

An airship flew slowly through the blue sky and the large screen on its belly played some news about the Arrowhead Comet that only approached once every 1700 years.

As he swung down an entire building with his giant mud arm, the High Priest finally came to a stop.

He had caused a frightening amount of destruction, but he hardly considered that worth focusing on at this point.

His eyes were on the building itself.

He had swung it down with such great force, but it had not crumbled to pieces or split in two. The building's structure remained entirely intact.

Of course, that was not due to the strength of the reinforced concrete.

This seemingly mysterious phenomenon had a legitimate explanation.

“Quite the interesting trick. Is that magnetism?”

“Shut…up.”

He thought he heard a voice from beyond the building.

“If you hadn’t done this, I wouldn’t have had to go to all this trouble. If I hadn’t done anything, *who knows what would have happened to everyone inside the building*.”

“Hah hah!! I see, I see. So you are here to save the people! That would mean you did more than catch it with magnetism. You must have added in a variety of tricks to make sure the people inside weren’t smashed to-…”

He did not have time to finish speaking.

He thought he heard someone kicking off the ground and Tokiwadai’s Ace jumped on top of the side wall of the building that was tilted on its side like a club.

She could not have circled around the building while supporting it.

Which meant…

(Was that voice a fake? Did she vibrate a thin metal panel like with a telephone? Even if she had supported it from below, shards of glass would have rained down on her.)

Something snapped from Mikoto’s arm like a whip.

It was a vibrating collection of iron sand. She first used it to sever the base of the giant arm supporting the building and then she sent it after the High Priest himself.

But…

“Watch out there. That’s dangerous.”

He sounded entirely unconcerned.

At the same time, the ground split open again and another giant arm burst out.

It pulled up another building and responded to the iron sand sword.

He did it all as casually as someone grabbing a chair or fire extinguisher when a suspicious person entered the school. That was all it took for him to use a building full of dozens or even hundreds of people like a disposable tool.

“This guy!!” roared Mikoto after she unintentionally slammed her whip-like iron sand sword into the building.

The High Priest did not seem to care.

“Now then, young lady. There are a number of ways to save people.”

“Kh.”

“The people inside this building will die without pain or fear, not knowing what happened to them. Isn’t that one form of salvation?”

As he spoke, the High Priest grabbed more and more buildings and threw them.

Not even Mikoto could hold back all of this. She focused her powers on saving lives by pulling water pipes and rebar from the buildings as cushions that were meant to be broken through, but it was unclear how long she could keep it up. She tried to stop and support the buildings while fighting to prevent the “contents” from being crushed, but more and more buildings were piled on top.

She could not say just how many people would be crushed inside if she made a single mistake.

(Not good! If this keeps up, I’ll be crushed underneath it all!!)

“Dammit!!”

Mikoto suddenly swung her iron sand sword, but not to attack the High Priest.

She cut into the ground below his feet and sent him falling into the subway tunnel below.

“Ho?”

The mummy actually laughed.

He sank down with the calm of an old man delightedly and intentionally falling for the pitfall his first grandchild had made.

The dozen or so seconds this gave Mikoto allowed her to somehow use her magnetism to set down the pile of buildings.

That was when she heard tires tearing into the ground behind her.

As soon as she noticed it, she was scooped off her feet, starting from her heels. Kamijou had approached from behind and used the acrobike’s Sliding to sweep her feet out from under her and force her onto the back seat.

“That’s why I was saying we can’t attack him head on!!” he shouted. “Even if he’s been weakened to a billionth or a trillionth of his full power, a Magic God is still a Magic God! Now grab on! He’ll be coming after us right away!!”

A dull sound reached them.

The ground swelled up. Both the earth and asphalt crumbled and something approached them like a shark’s fin out at sea.

“W-wait! What is that!? Wah, wah, wah, wah, wah!!”

As soon as Kamijou righted the acrobike and began to flee, the earth split open.

The High Priest burst out with his dried arms spread wide.

Two open palms lay below him. The massive arms of mud seemed to decorate the Magic God’s arrival like giant flowers.

“What will you do now, Kamijou Touma?”

The mummy gently placed his feet on the ground.

“I told you at the beginning that you are going to catch on sooner or later.”

He charged toward them with the force of a rocket engine.

Part 4

“…”

Akikawa Mie remained silent while flipped upside down. She had shoulder-length black hair and a tan that was healthy but a little unusual for December. She wore fairly subdued lip balm and her nails were covered in nearly transparent polish. She wanted to assert herself, but she did not want anyone around her to notice and say so. It was adorable how one could catch a glimpse of that conflicting state of mind. She wore a white long-sleeved sailor uniform, a miniskirt adventurously shortened just a bit more than average, and a mint green cardigan tied around her waist by the sleeves. The cardigan was less meant to fight the cold and more meant to keep anyone from seeing up her skirt when she climbed any stairs. A three thousand yen sports bag hung from her shoulder. She mostly looked like a normal middle school girl, but the problem was her posture.

Whether you wanted to call it a pile driver, a backdrop, or a German suplex, she looked like she had just been on the receiving end of a dramatic professional wrestling move. Her legs were spread wide and her butt was sticking up toward the sky, so it was not a pose a young maiden should be making. And what had happened to the aforementioned cardigan? We can keep it a secret that her panties alone were a little too “adult” for her age.

She wondered how this had happened.

Then it came back to her. There had not been any normal classes due to the anti-crime orientation and the police officers, hostages, and criminals could move freely between schools to gather points. However, she had been entirely uninterested in that, so she had seen it as a lucky chance to skip school and take a break. She had been inside this commercial building because her mother had asked her to bring her father his lunch.

But then something confusing had happened.

The entire building had flipped upside down.

Not even she could give a good explanation of why it had happened, but it was the truth and there was nothing else to say. And she was not the only one having difficulty there.

“Again! How am I supposed to believe you when you tell me that? The building flew? It stabbed upside down into the ground? Our employees know the basics of construction and design, don’t they? Do you have any idea how many hundreds of tons a twenty-five story building is!?”

“Yes, yes. You are exactly right. But, well…”

“If you’re falling behind in your work, at least come up with a better excuse. I will be reporting this to the higher ups. And besides, Akikawa-san, you were the one that made that mistake in ordering the liquid materials, so…”

Still upside down, she turned toward the voices and saw her father bowing with a troubled expression and a cellphone to his ear. He was polite even when the other man could not see it. He was the one who had been caught up in some kind of incident(?), so why did he have to apologize? Once the TV and internet news picked up on it, everyone would know he was telling the truth. But Mie had a feeling that man on the phone would not apologize even then.

Why had this happened?

When had the rails veered off course?

She could not remember in the slightest no matter how long she stared at those glasses, that comb over, and that too-skinny back.

“Sigh.”

Her sigh was much colder than she had expected.

Sitting here was not going to help, so she got up from her upside down position and brushed off her butt and back. Her father gave her an apologetic glance, but he quickly returned to subconsciously bowing. She waved his way and then left. She had completed her mission of bringing him his lunch.

Shards of glass were scattered here and there, but she still walked along that fairly dangerous hallway (while technically using the ceiling). At the same time, she pulled out her own cellphone and called her mother.

“I finished my errand. I got caught up in some pretty amazing trouble, though.”

“I heard! The building flew through the air and stabbed upside down into the ground! At first I thought it was from a rival meant to disturb us, but it sounds like it’s for real. Did you see it happen?”

“I’m inside actually.”

“Veh!?”

Her mother apparently could not ignore that, but Akikawa Mie waved her hand dismissively.

After she did, she realized that was not much different from her father bowing over the phone.

“It amazes me too, but both dad and I are fine. He seems to be having trouble explaining what happened to his company, though.”

“Ah ha ha. I can imagine.”

“I really only see his lame side.”

Her voice grew unintentionally dark and heavy.

It sounded like she was asking why her mother had married him when she was a jewelry designer, earned more than five times what he did, and had enough influence to take part in a project to retrieve a new jewel from the Arrowhead Comet.

But that did not seem to bother her mother who replied immediately.

“That’s because the vaults your father builds protect the jewelry I create. You may not know it, but he’s full of amazing charm.”

“Really?”

Her true thoughts slipped out.

Still, her mother continued as normal, as if to say their bond was not weak enough to be harmed by that.

“Personally, I think a polished vault is a lot prettier than the contents. Jewelry is just a decoration. Literally. Rubies and sapphires aren’t expensive because they’re rare or because of their red or blue shine. They’re only so expensive because people give them that value added.”

“Value added?”

Akikawa Mie thought that was getting too complicated for a middle school girl like herself.

“That’s right. I’m currently working on a liquid diamond project. At five hundred carats, they’re worth six trillion yen.”

“That number sounds like something from a national budget.”

“Ah ha ha! We can inflate the price all we want since no one’s going to buy it regardless. It’s no different from the world’s largest diamond that was presented to some royal family. Besides, a liquid diamond is theoretically impossible.”

“?”

“Diamonds don’t melt even if you heat them. They have no melting point. The value comes from resolving that contradiction, but it’s really just modified seawater.”

“Eh? Seawater?”

“Seawater has a lot of precious metals dissolved in it: gold, platinum, rare earths, and even carbon. Condensing that inside a heart or star shaped container is what we call a liquid diamond. It’s officially said to be five hundred carats, but who knows if you would even get a single carat if you gathered it all up. …Also, industrial water jet cutters have diamond dust mixed in with the water, but humans have such a weakness for the word ‘natural’. We just put a near infinite price tag on it. It’s something rare, something never-before-seen, something that’s never existed before.”

Her mother sounded exasperated.

“It’s such a meaningless business. The excitement over the seventh achondrite with the Arrowhead Comet is the same. It doesn’t shine brightly and it looks just like a normal rock if no one explains its importance. …That’s why I prefer the unchanging luster of a vault over a jewel. The more you accumulate inside, the more you will always have inside. It’s honest, it’s sincere, and its beauty never wavers.”

"…"

"In the same way, there are so many wonderful things about your father. If there weren't I wouldn't have married him. You can't exchange rings if all you have are hopes and dreams. Ah ha ha."

For some reason, her mother hung up as she laughed.

Of course, Akikawa Mie did not want to ruin her parents' relationship and create a messy divorce. She had no problem with a loving and wholesome relationship.

"?"

That was when she heard a dull metal sound.

Curious, she looked over and spotted a jewelry shop. There was no sign of a worker. The showcases had completely shattered, scattering shards of glass everywhere, but she knew the rings and necklaces lying on the floor (no, the ceiling) were not worth all that much. Anything actually valuable would be locked up in the vault.

That large vault seemed to be the source of the sound.

It came from the thick door that her father had made and her mother admired from the bottom of her heart.

(She likes this?)

She clearly did not understand why as she stared at the door, but something strange was happening inside it. Like chocolate left on the road during a sunny day, the supposedly sturdy door was visibly bending.

"Wait, wait, wait! What is this!?"

Mie was surprised, but she worked to calm herself.

The vault was heavy. It would weigh dozens of tons if not over one hundred. The walls were naturally quite thick. No matter how many simulations had been done, would they have ever imagined the building would be plucked from the ground, thrown through the air, and stabbed back into the ground upside down?

Simply put, the vault had to be crushing itself with its own weight.

Unlike the solid walls, the door contained a complex structure and the damage was focused there.

The girl watched as she heard the sounds of breaking metal. She had no way of knowing, but she was hearing the destruction of the strong deadbolts meant to lock the circular door. What she did know was that the bent door had creaked open.

“Wait a second.”

Wasn’t this really bad?

She instinctually looked back toward the exit and thought about calling for an adult, but then she heard some young male voices from the corridor.

“If the building was torn from the ground, all the cables will have been broken. The electronic locks and security cameras won’t be working. We can steal as much as we want.”

“Come to think of it, the big vault they were talking about on the news is in here, isn’t it? The one holding the five hundred carat liquid diamond.”

Mie felt a squeezing in her heart.

She could no longer rely on an adult…or rather, on a stranger.

Her father had made the vault and her mother had worked on the liquid diamond project. Having it stolen here would hurt them both.

She made up her mind quickly.

Akikawa Mie slipped inside the vault through the door that had bent under its own weight. The inside glittered with a silver light like stainless steel and all four walls were covered with locked lockers. Most of the jewelry seemed to be safe, but unfortunately, the door to the liquid diamond was the only one that had broken. The heart-shaped liquid diamond container casually glittered inside a cylindrical storage tube.

"Fine then!!"

She grabbed the liquid diamond's storage tube and turned right around. She had no intention of holing up inside the vault. She ran from the jewelry shop and the young men immediately noticed her.

"That girl!"

"Damn, so someone else had the same idea."

"Hey, she's got what they showed on the news. That's the liquid diamond!!"

(I'm not the same as you morons!!)

Their footsteps approached her, but she began to flee in earnest. While many students were making mock escapes in the anti-crime orientation, a legitimate one had just begun.

Part 5

"That is exactly the point. There are several categories: meteorite, comet, and asteroid. But this is one is known as an achondrite."

During the afternoon a boring-sounding educational program played from the televisions lined up in an electronics store window.

Hamazura Shiage sat on the road while someone grabbed him by the collar.

The small hands grabbing him belonged to Fremea Seivelun.

“Nyah, nyah!! In the first place, I got the criminal. That’s one stamp for me!!”

“…”

The ever-excited eight-year-old girl with blonde hair and blue eyes was not listening to anything anyone said, so she still thought Hamazura was a criminal no matter how many times he explained he was supposed to be a hostage. They had known each other for a while now and he had saved her life a few times, but his “villain’s face” seemed to have left a powerful impression on her. …Of course, Hamazura could not argue too much when he did not think he was a good person either.

“If I fill up the stamp card, I get to order from the hidden school lunch menu. Nyah! Beef stroganoff!!”

“You’re trying to eat something crazy again, aren’t you? Doesn’t stroganoff sound like the name of a robot?”

It was beginning to sound like it would be faster to head on to the anti-crime orientation’s gathering point and have one of the officials explain the situation to the girl, so Hamazura stood up just as Fremea wanted. He then followed her as she tugged on his hand.

“Achondrites can be generally divided into six types and they are important resources for investigating the creation of the solar system. However, this Arrowhead Comet is gathering so much attention due to the possibility of discovering a seventh achondrite. Isn’t it romantic for the unknown seventh to be a clump of mineral in a ball of ice rather than just an asteroid?”

“Hey, Fremea, do you know what the Arrowhead Comet is?”

“N-nyah? In the first place, you need to know your place if you think you can ask me about something that tricky! Nyah, nyah!”

“I can forget sometimes, but you really are Frenda’s sister.”

He sounded annoyed, but he revealed the arbitrary knowledge he barely remembered.

“Some huge star is going to be falling. You should be able to make as many wishes as you want.”

“…”

At that point, Fremea began trembling as she held his hand.

“Nyah, nyah!! I-I didn’t know you were that much of a villain. It’s too soon to go to the movie version!!”

“*I’m* not summoning the thing and the world isn’t going to be destroyed!!”

That was when Hamazura’s cellphone rang in his pocket.

He pulled it out, checked the screen, and found he had an email.

“What the hell? It’s from Aneri?”

He came to a stop while holding Fremea’s hand, but the email’s text appeared to be corrupted and he had no idea what it meant. Looking at it was not going to help, but he found he could not ignore it and just continued staring pointlessly at it.

A moment later, a full-speed acrobike and a purple-robed mummy cut by in front of them.

Fremea held her hat down lest the tremendous gust of wind blow it away and Hamazura looked up from his phone in surprise.

But by then, there was nothing left.

What would have happened had he not received the email and had continued across the crosswalk?

The program that knew the truth was monitoring Hamazura and Fremea through the surveillance cameras.

Part 6

Surprisingly, they could not lose the High Priest in a pure competition of speed.

This was different from a Saint who could break the sound barrier. They were definitely faster when it came to pure speed, but the High Priest was not pushing himself to his limits. He would never self-destruct. Instead of just quick bursts of speed, he had near infinite stamina. In some ways, this was much scarier.

Kamijou made several sharp turns with the bicycle, jumped down some stairs, placed the wheels on the railing to slide down it in a Slope Clear cycle art, cut across a park, and raced down a narrow alleyway. With its powerful gyros, suspension, and motor, the acrobike could be used to hop on one wheel across narrow poles, so who could say how many times Kamijou would have fallen with a normal bicycle.

“Where’s the High Priest!?”

“That old man was at that corner…that corner…ahhh!! Here he comes! He’s still after us!!”

Kamijou reacted to Mikoto’s shout by pedaling even harder.

A pile of trash filling the alley was in their way, but they would hit the air conditioner jutting from the wall if they made a large jump. Kamijou locked the front wheel, lifted up the back wheel and Mikoto’s back seat, and twisted the handlebars. That was the same as the Flail Turn, but this time, he unlocked the front wheel partway through.

This was known as the Flying D.

The entire bike rose up and turned horizontally in midair. It then rotated once horizontally and used the power of the gyros to land safely. After clearing the obstacles both above and below, they continued racing forward.

“Wasn’t that a pretty major trick!?”

“It’s actually really easy once you get the hang of it. You can zip along anywhere and even fly through the air. It’s the machine that’s amazing, not me. You won’t fall over no matter what you do.”

They made a few more narrow turns and the tone of Mikoto’s voice changed as she checked behind them from her feminine sideways sitting position.

“We’re safe…I think. We can’t let our guard down, but I can’t see him anymore.”

Even if they could not outdo him in speed, they only had to make sure he lost sight of them. The basics of losing a pursuer seemed to still apply to a Magic God.

Still, Kamijou was afraid to come to a stop, so he slowed down but continued to pedal.

They left the back alley and returned to a main road.

“Pant, pant… What do we do now? Really.”

At full power, Othinus had been able to destroy and remake the world as easily as snapping her fingers. This may not have been that bad, but a Magic God was still a Magic God. If they thoughtlessly continued a game of tag with him, there was no guarantee Academy City would be leftover afterwards.

Academy City had been in danger many times before.

Plenty of people had given no thought to human life.

But the High Priest was somehow different.

He had not begun some over-the-top plan to intentionally take countless lives. He was not avoiding obvious destruction in an attempt to hide the existence of the magic side.

He was simply accomplishing his goal.

He did not care if merely swinging an arm or a leg took millions of lives.

He did not even give it that much thought.

What had happened to not wanting to cause any trouble and wanting some formless peace of mind? He was too inconsistent.

Mikoto spoke up as she wrapped her arms around him and sat sideways.

“He isn’t going to throw a tantrum as soon as he loses sight of us, is he? He isn’t going to indiscriminately destroy the city until we come out, is he?”

“I can’t say for sure, but I doubt he would choose to do that.”

“Why not?”

“It isn’t an issue of having a conscience. If he liked that kind of method, he wouldn’t have come to me when he first contacted me. He would have taken a hostage and led me to the stage where we would meet. It’s probably just an issue of his tastes, though.”

“I see. So it’s like how our #5 will never challenge you to a physical fight. It isn’t an issue of what they can or can’t do.”

“Still, if we don’t do anything, we’ll be stuck with this fear of constantly being chased. It may be big, but it’s just one city and we can’t ignore him. We need to think up a way to turn this around.”

“For now, we need to try not to get anyone else involved, right? Is there somewhere without a lot of people…and without many buildings for him to grab? …Like a large park or maybe the mountains?"

That comment seemed so out of place that Kamijou almost started laughing.

Not wanting to get anyone else involved in a fight with a Magic God was an obvious desire, but it was a nearly impossible task. He had never even thought of it when facing Othinus at full power.

"Misaka. If we do find an environment where we can fight without getting anyone else involved, do you really think we can beat that High Priest?"

"Of course! If he doesn't use any cheap tricks, then I could-…!!"

"Misaka."

He called her name again and she groaned behind him.

She then spoke as if confessing her guilt.

"I can't know until I try. I will admit he isn't someone I can optimistically say we have a 100% chance of beating."

That was an admirable thing for someone so full of self-confidence to admit.

Kamijou made a suggestion as he pedaled.

"We can't randomly attack him until we pull our odds up to 100%. As you've seen, his morals give no thought whatsoever to human life. He isn't going to spare you just because you beg for your life."

"I know that, but that brings us back to square one. How exactly are we supposed to have 100% odds of defeating that monster? Throw him in a garbage disposal plant's incinerator? Run him through a print shop's rotary press to crush him flat? Tear him to pieces with the giant lawnmowers used on American farms? I can picture him coming back from all of those with a smile on his face."

“U-ugh. You sure can come up with some surprisingly gruesome ideas, Misaka.”

“D-don’t act so disturbed!! I only gave you those examples because you asked!! Mumble, mumble (Huh!? Was it a mistake to watch all those zombie movies yesterday!?)”

However, that was the problem for Kamijou as well.

How exactly were they supposed to defeat a Magic God? He had once directly fought Othinus, a true Magic God, but that had been an exception among exceptions. He was unsure whether he could really call it a fight and he certainly could not say he had won.

And he could not do the same thing against the High Priest.

He could not challenge him time and again, waiting for the mummy to break in the very, very end.

He understood that.

He knew it all too well, but that brought them back to square one.

What exactly were they supposed to do?

“Honestly, you really are hopeless.”

Suddenly, he heard a male voice, or something like it, and he turned toward it. He found a sort of red paper airplane flying alongside the acrobike.

The spiky-haired boy initially put up his guard, thinking it was some kind of tracking device sent by the High Priest, but…

“Have you forgotten who I am? I am one of the four corners supporting the world and the member of God’s Right Seat corresponding to red and the right. That should be enough to tell you who I am.”

“Fiamma?” muttered Kamijou.

Mikoto still looked confused as she pressed up against his back.

Like with a paper cup telephone, something vibrated on the paper airplane's main wing to produce the voice.

"I more or less know the situation and I have a countermeasure for the High Priest. After all, I have the fairy spell that produced a malfunction in Othinus. If I hone it and overwhelmingly increase the speed at which it peels away the Magic God's flesh, I can create a spell specialized for destroying them."

"For destroying Magic Gods?" Kamijou gulped. "You mean humans can defeat those Magic Gods?"

"I wouldn't say I could if I couldn't and that is why I am here in the first place. Now, show yourself at District 5's central park."

"District 5? The one with lots of college students?"

"How should I know? The High Priest will keep chasing you no matter what you do, won't he? If you guide him to that point, I will take over. This isn't my first time facing a Magic God. There is nothing to worry about."

"…"

When he heard that, Kamijou knew he was being released from the seemingly endless chase.

His entire body relaxed. Even with the gyros on the front and back wheels, the acrobike required human effort to function. It slowed down and Kamijou's feet pressed against the ground.

He could finally breathe a sigh of relief.

This was a brief but definite respite.

But in the very next moment…

Part 7

The High Priest grinned.

Part 8

The ground right next to the acrobike suddenly seemed to swell upwards and something like a giant alligator mouth swallowed Fiamma’s paper airplane whole. It was actually a giant mud arm that burst from the asphalt and it would be more accurate to say it had crushed the paper airplane in its palm.

“Wha-?”

Abnormal tension enveloped Kamijou’s body.

With its job complete, the arm crumbled away.

Once the blinding mud fell away, his vision cleared once more.

“Uho hoi☆ Missed me?”

A purple-robed Magic God ran toward them while waving a dried branch of an arm.

“Uuh…”

Kamijou no longer cared about shame or appearances.

He poured all of his weight into pedaling the acrobike with Mikoto sitting behind him. He locked the front wheel, pedaled with all of his weight to build up plenty of energy in the back wheel, and then unlocked the front wheel while lifting the acrobike in a wheelie.

The bicycle leaped skyward rather than forward.

This was the Takeoff.

Kamijou and Mikoto were released like a fighter jet launched from a catapult.

“Whoaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa!!!!!!”

He cried out and kept racing forward as he did so.

The High Priest also increased his speed. The asphalt split around him and countless giant arms burst out. They approached to crush Kamijou and Mikoto from above. As soon as Kamijou used the acrobike’s powerful suspension to jump two meters into the air, a horizontal attack swept by below them. It broke the trees lining the road and sent the blade of a wind turbine flying until it stabbed into a nearby building.

“What is that!? This really isn’t normal!!”

Mikoto could not help but shout in anger at how unreasonable it all was.

The High Priest was giving no thought to making this a one-on-one fight. This was not on such a small scale. Like bringing a powerful vacuum cleaner into a model city, he would tear through the entire landscape and hope his target was caught in the midst of it all.

Yes.

The High Priest was not fighting.

He was unilaterally hunting down his prey. That was his only focus.

“What are we going to do!?”

Kamijou clenched his teeth at Mikoto’s question.

He had only one thing he could say.

“We have to rely on him.”

“On who!?”

“That Fiamma guy I just spoke with!! I heard the term ‘fairy spell’ a few times during the mess with Othinus and in Denmark. If he knows what it is and has made it his own, then he might be the most knowledgeable person when it comes to fighting a Magic God!!”

Part 9

For the time being, Akikawa Mie stuck the liquid diamond's storage tube into her three thousand yen sports bag.

Meanwhile, she made a call on her cellphone.

"Listen, Mie-chan. Give up on this stupid idea and get rid of the liquid diamond. I don't mind."

"But mom!"

"Even if someone steals it, there's no way they can sell a jewel worth six trillion yen. We have the patent and only we know how to make it, so we can quickly track it down on the black market even if it's transferred into another container. We can even identify the specific diamond by checking the plankton in the seawater, so we can retrieve it even via international law. So it will be okay. There's nothing to worry about. You don't need to do anything so dangerous!!"

"But…"

She bit her lip with the phone in hand.

"But that will still mean it was stolen and that's enough to hurt you and dad. It'll hurt the path you've proudly walked down!"

"Mie-chan!!"

This conversation was getting nowhere fast, so she hung up.

She ran from here to there, but it was all bad for her heart. The anti-crime orientation was underway, some buildings had been mysteriously thrown around, and there were apparently traffic accidents all over. The roads were at a standstill and people covered the sidewalks, but they somehow all looked like robbers to her.

(I-I need to go to mom's company. Then I can give this to her.)

"Oh, are you really leaving now? You'll have to use the train to get home, then."

"A colleague of mine ran into some trouble. That Shiosai is feeling pretty down. I need to get an investigation started and set up an emergency search. Honestly, whoever grabbed that Anti-Skill equipment has some guts."

"Hmm. When I see you getting pulled around by your job like this, it makes me wonder if I should get back to some real work. But for now, I think I'll just keep volunteering."

"Kikyou… Oh, honestly. Adults really do rot when they get used to not having a job. You need to be more careful."

Akikawa Mie let out a shriek when she turned a corner and nearly ran into two adult women. They gave her a confused look, but she quickly moved past them.

Calling Anti-Skill or Judgment did not occur to her. In this abnormal situation, even they were "strangers" to her. She could not treat this liquid diamond like someone else's problem, she could not pass it on to someone else, and she could not rely on someone else.

"Is the subway…? Good, it's still running!"

There was a small traffic jam out front, but that had nothing to do with the tracks deep underground. She held her phone out to the ticket gate instead of an IC card and made her way to the platform like always. Revealing it in public was dangerous, but she was still worried enough to secretly glance inside her sports bag.

The liquid diamond's container had not broken.

It was worth six trillion yen, so it was not that fragile.

She breathed a sigh of relief, but then she noticed something.

Some strange text was engraved into the storage tube containing the heart-shaped five hundred carat container.

It said 1.5V and 22MHz.

(Wh-what is this? Volts? Megahertz?)

Mie did not know much about jewels or security, but even an amateur could convert some of it into words and those words covered her in cold sweat.

Some other people on the platform spoke from nearby.

One was a high school aged girl wearing an ao dai and with a cruel look in her eyes. The other was a small girl wearing the black leather outfit of a punk rocker and a white hooded jacket, except the jacket was simply hanging by the hood.

“Oh, what’s this, what’s this? Something’s tingling. Soooomeone nearby has something valuable!!”

“More importantly, can you explain why I’m carrying all of your stuff?”

“You’re helping Misaka shop for the first time after her broken bone healed. Of course, if you ignore Misaka, she can use her body to control your cyborg body! Nya ha ha ha!!”

“You’re rotten! Dammit, you really are rotten to the core!!”

(Wait. Does this thing have a transmitter on it!?)

Given the value of the liquid diamond it would have been surprising if it did not. But would that help her in this case? What if someone other than Anti-Skill or Judgment intercepted the signal? Or what if a proper member of law enforcement started having wicked ideas? What if that girl with the cruel look in her eyes had the ability to pick up on it? What if she tried to separate Mie from the crowd or just tried grab the six trillion yen jewel despite the risk?

(What do I do? What am I supposed to do?)

Mie frantically tried to use her fingernail to scrape at the writing on the surface of the container in her sports bag, but she did not actually know where the transmitter was. Would scraping at it be enough to break it and how would she even know if it was broken? Would putting too much of a burden on the storage tube allow the liquid diamond itself to leak out? It was nothing but unknowns on top of unknowns.

Then the subway train slid into the platform.

“Oh, honestly!!”

Akikawa Mie put off thinking until later. She ran onto the train with the sports bag hanging from her shoulder.

“Hell, yeah. It’s actually working. Hey, I know where it is!”

That excited comment came from Kenzan Shouji, a college-aged young man.

He was holding a smartphone, but it used a different model of SIM card from any phone available to the public. It was a P-phone made exclusively for Anti-Skill. Just like a police radio, anyone obsessed with that sort of thing would love to get their hands on one.

In other words, it was not something one could normally find.

There was a reason Kenzan was swinging one around like a toy despite that.

He had pulled it out of an Anti-Skill vehicle that might as well have been scrap metal after one of the small-scale accidents occurring all over.

A nervous friend of his spoke up from the side. This friend was Okada Ayumu, another college student.

“B-but anyone from Anti-Skill can pick up that signal, right? Won’t the real ones be rushing there already? Wouldn’t going for it be dangerous? I don’t want to get filled with bullets.”

“Don’t worry.”

Kenzan patted the seat of his pants with his other hand.

A lump of metal with a black luster was casually stuck inside his pants there.

It was the kind of handgun issued to Anti-Skill.

“Look at all this confusion. And not all of the real deal are noble heroes. This is six trillion yen we’re talking about, so they’ll be scrambling for it themselves. We just have to fire some in that storm of gunfire and get to the liquid diamond first. It won’t be hard just to grab it. Things are looking good for us.”

The last of the trio, Higata Akio, listened to that in confusion.

(How could this have happened?)

Back when they decided to steal some things in the upside-down building, it had not been clear whether they were actually going to do it. It had felt unfair to just trudge on home after being caught in that kind of trouble. They had wanted to make up for the misfortune they had experienced. It should have only been a joke born of their frustration.

But now they had a piece of Anti-Skill equipment and a handgun.

Higata gulped.

(Are we really going to do this? We aren’t just peeking inside some broken vault. That was a middle school girl who ran off with it. And yet…)

“You gotta problem, Higata?”

His “friend” spoke to him with the piece of metal stuck in the back of his pants.

“W-well, I…”

“*You gotta problem?*”

The pressure was unbearable.

A strange pyramid structure had formed that was clearly different from their previous relationship.

More importantly, the presence of the handgun weighed heavily on his mind.

They were talking about a girl, but she was still a stranger. Was he prepared to put himself in danger to save her?

"No…I don't."

"Good. Now, let's get started. Heaven on earth is waiting for us."

Higata truly did wonder how this had happened.

The madness was infecting person after person and they would probably all come tumbling down with no one in the center.

Part 10

Flamma of the Right had the fairy spell that would be their trump card against the High Priest. He had told them to meet him in District 5's central park.

That district bordered District 7.

"But what's the shortest route!?" shouted Kamijou while pedaling the acrobike with all his might.

The mummy High Priest was still approaching from directly behind them.

Mikoto operated her cellphone with a thumb while pressed against his back.

"Um, I'm getting our current location now. We're on Leaf Street, so…turn right at the intersection five hundred meters ahead!! That will take us straight to District 5!!"

"Cellphone?"

But Kamijou's focus turned elsewhere.

"That's right! A cellphone!! I could use that to call Index or Othinus!!"

“What!? You’re going to use *my* phone to call some other girl!?”

“You choose now to get mad? God, what a pain!!”

They shot straight past the aforementioned intersection while speaking, so Kamijou used a Flail Turn to make a 180 degree turn, returned to the intersection, and ignored the traffic light as he made the turn.

(If I speak with them, I might find a more direct weakness in the High Priest. It might only be learning his habits, but I need something to keep us alive until we get to Fiamma!!)

He poured his full strength into racing down the road, pedaled the bicycle at over sixty kph, and set an awful example by looking away from the road to operate his own cellphone. But…

“Ksssshhhhh!! …The signal in your area is too crowded, so the number you have called cannot be-…”

“What the hell? There’s an interfering signal? Wait, don’t tell me… Misakaaaaaa!!”

“I-it isn’t me! I can’t control it!!”

Given the situation, he had to abandon the rare opportunity he thought had opened up.

He looked back while pedaling intensely and was pretty sure the High Priest was closer than before.

“Oh, hell. Did choosing the shortest route come back to bite us? He’s faster on a clear straightaway. He’s going to catch up at this rate!!”

“You told me to give you the shortest route!!”

“I didn’t say it was your fault!!”

They drove below a blue road sign that passed over the entire road.

If it was accurate, they had just moved from District 7 to District 5.

“Misaka, how far to the central park!?”

“Only, um, two kilometers!!”

He felt an intense pressure from behind. The High Priest would catch up at this rate, but it would take too long to reach the central park if they took random turns to cut off his view like before. Either way, their current methods were not enough. The High Priest would catch up and tear them to pieces.

Mikoto spoke quietly while pressing against his back.

Rather than having a sudden idea, she seemed to have managed to gather her thoughts during the chase.

“Hey, so we win if we get to the central park before he catches up, right?”

“Yes! The problem is that we don’t have any way of doing that!!”

“Forcing the acrobike to go any faster would be difficult. It’s already at its limits and using my power for a boost could burn out the motor.”

“And!? What do we do!?”

“Then we just have to slow down that High Priest guy.”

Kamijou was dumbfounded, but the situation did not stop for them. He had to say something back.

“Are you serious?”

“I’m not shameless enough to make a joke at a time like this.”

“You saw what happened earlier, didn’t you!? Even a full-power Railgun wasn’t enough to-…!!”

“Yes, I know all too well that I don’t stand a chance in a head-on battle!!”

Strength gathered in the arms around him.

She pressed her face into his back and seemed to groan.

"(It wasn't enough. It wasn't nearly enough!! I thought I was on the same level as you and I thought I could handle this too, but I'm not and I can't!!)"

Her namesake had been easily swatted aside.

And what had happened then?

Unlike her, that pointy-haired boy had not been remotely surprised by the outcome.

He had simply watched it play out as if to say he had known it would not work and that she did not need to worry about it.

That, more than anything else, had made her heart boil over.

But he was not the only person who had gotten her heart worked up.

There was another.

Kamijou knew nothing the two of them could do would work, but now this Fiamma person had butted in from a distance. Mikoto was right by his side, but she was of no use to him. Instead, he was placing his hopes on some third party.

What was this noisy feeling that had filled her ever since she stood in the center of Tokyo Bay?

"(You can just barely stand up against that mummy named the High Priest, but I can't reach your level! I doubt I can catch up even if I use my prized Railgun!!)"

"What's the matter, Misaka? Hey!"

"It's nothing," she said while removing her face from his back.

This was no time to sulk. She could not give up.

No one was going to wait around for her.

Not the High Priest and not the boy so close to her.

"So I won't do anything that reckless. I know I can't win, so I'll stick to buying us some time. Are you willing to listen now!?"

"How can you slow him down?"

"It isn't impossible if I only have to do it once."

Part 11

"Hm?"

The mummy High Priest's skin split and his eyelids moved as he raced down the street with tremendous speed.

The acrobike was holding its position one hundred meters ahead of him, but then the bicycle swerved to the side. Its tires seemed to have slipped on the dried leaves scattered on the road.

It quickly regained its balance, but it had lost some speed.

It tried to gain some external acceleration by grabbing on to the side of an unmanned escort truck driving along as part of the anti-crime orientation, but that was not enough to escape the High Priest.

He closed in on the acrobike.

Once he saw a chance, the mummy took action.

The asphalt around him swelled up and giant tree-like arms burst from the earth below. A palm larger than a home economics classroom and a fist harder than concrete shot down toward the acrobike with the force of a shooting star.

Suddenly, the giant arms stopped moving, as if they were bound by chains. The different arms twisted around each other like they were caught in a net.

While still running alongside the arms, the High Priest instantly saw through it.

(That magnetism from before.... Did she cover the area with iron sand so it would naturally be incorporated into the arms?)

But when it came to a direct competition of strength, no one could defeat a Magic God.

As soon as the High Priest sent a simple command, the giant arms ripped themselves apart. They had been pressed together as if clapping or rubbing together, but they were forced apart.

He had retrieved his weapons.

This time, he would crush the acrobike to rob them of their transportation and he would acquire Kamijou Touma.

But something interrupted the Magic God's thoughts.

"…?"

At first, he thought it was gentle breeze.

But it was not.

"Ohh…"

It definitely was not.

"Ohhhhhhhhhh!? Is this…!?"

Misaka Mikoto twisted around while sitting on the acrobike's back seat. She made a handgun gesture toward the High Priest who was approaching from behind.

"A vacuum may sound like something special, but you can easily make one with a rubber suction cup. In fact, you can even make one in the bath by pressing your palms together."

A violent gust of wind blew through, but not because the acrobike was moving at sixty kph.

"And did you know this? In wind tunnel experiments that use artificial winds to check the aerodynamics of cars and airplanes, they use a big propeller up to a point, but even that has its limits.

After that, they either blow in highly compressed air or prepare a vacuum tank to suck the air from the wind tunnel.”

She had mixed iron sand in with the High Priest’s giant arms and she had only needed to take control for a few seconds.

The gigantic palms had pressed together and created a certain level of vacuum between each other.

From there, the High Priest only had to regain control and open the door to that vacuum.

“But know this. In wind tunnel experiments using vacuum tanks, the gust of wind can exceed the Mach wind speeds of a supersonic fighter jet!! Just like right now!!!!!!”

It sounded like an explosion.

Unlike a wind tunnel, the road was an open space and Kamijou and Mikoto were a fair distance away. It only felt like a powerful blast of wind to them, but what about to the High Priest who had opened that door so close by?

“Ohh…”

The mummy’s feet left the ground.

He ignored gravity.

“Ohhhhhhhhhh!? Is this…!?”

Even his yelling voice was swallowed up by the empty air. He was sucked in toward the point in space where the palms of the giant hands were disintegrating.

It was not clear what would happen to him.

A normal human’s eardrums and organs would be destroyed by the harsh pressure change and their skeleton itself could be smashed, but it was a complete mystery how much a normally fatal blow would affect a mummy like him.

But that did not matter.

Kamijou and Mikoto had a different win condition in mind.

“I see it!! That’s the central park’s entrance!!”

“Okay, here goes!!”

They did not need to directly defeat him. They only needed to buy a dozen or so seconds of time.

Kamijou stopped thinking about what would happen later. He sacrificed all of his remaining stamina to pedal so hard he thought his muscles were going to rip apart. He did it all to reach one of the central park’s ten or twenty entrances.

He heard a deep sound behind him.

The High Priest had already torn through the supersonic wind and taken a new step forward. He had already freed himself from his bonds and resumed his full-power pursuit. That trick was unlikely to work a second or third time.

Would this be enough for them to reach Fiamma?

Or would the High Priest catch them first?

It all came down to that.

“Get there…”

Kamijou gave a roar as he stared at the central park’s gate up ahead.

“Get therrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrreeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!!”

Part 12

That man slowly walked across the grass that had grown light brown in the chill of winter.

He exclusively wore the color red and he was missing an arm, but neither the garbage man grabbing an empty can from the ground nor the young wife taking her dog for a walk paid any attention to him. He had erased his own presence so those outsiders would not notice him.

His name was Fiamma of the Right.

He had once started World War Three in his desire to save the entire human race.

(Not long now.)

He determined that while feeling calm enough to enjoy rather than curse the freezing December wind. He had not actually contacted Kamijou Touma, but he could hear the distant noise approaching.

He had asked that boy to come to District 5's central park and it seemed he had enough sense to keep his promises.

“Hmph.”

Fiamma of the Right had learned to use a few pieces of magic even after losing his “arm”. He had done so through his contact with the abnormal being named Ollerus. The fairy spell was one of those. It had originally been made to defeat the Magic God named Othinus.

When he thought about it, there had been something about those two he had not liked from the very beginning.

They had mastered magic to the point of becoming a god. They had used the word “god” so lightly and irreverently, but there had also been no salvation in the fairy spell. That was true whether it had made Othinus powerless as planned or if it had instead destroyed her body's structure from within.

In Denmark, the fairy spell Fiamma had fired into Othinus had been the real problem in the very, very end. A few coincidences had allowed Othinus to continue living, but what would have happened otherwise?

How much would it have affected that boy's structure?

Fiamma had made clear plans to save the entire human race, but not even he could figure that one out.

This was a ritual to cleanse himself of that.

A number of things had happened after Othinus had become a full Magic God. If not for certain coincidences, the world could easily have *still been* destroyed, so he had to atone for that sin.

"…"

He had to do the same thing here as with Othinus.

With his mind made up, he produced a stake of light in his left hand.

But this stake did not fit in just his left hand.

In an instant, it grew to five hundred meters long and cut across the central park.

(Even this…)

He only had to make physical contact with the Magic God. If he shoved it directly into the center of the High Priest's body, the fairy spell would rapidly destroy his structure.

(Even this is on a small scale for something meant to defeat a Magic God.)

Ollerus's goal had been to drag a Magic God down to the level of a human, but Fiamma had changed that.

That said, he had not altered it much. As soon as he hit, he would simply use the exact same spell 2,070,000 times in a row. Bit by bit, he would widen the distortion and finally destroy the Magic God. This was a Fiamma of the Right original that used his specialization in disintegration techniques.

(I suppose this still doesn't bring me anywhere close to that boy who dragged a full-power Othinus out of that quagmire without using something like this.)

The sound of tires tearing at the ground grew much louder.

The pointy-haired boy shot into the central park. He was covered in sweat, his hair was drenched, and there was not even an iota of composure in his ghastly expression.

But if he had been alone, he probably would not have been that frantic to escape.

An unfamiliar girl clung to him from the back seat of the electrically-assisted bicycle.

“He hasn’t changed.”

Fiamma said only that and smiled slightly.

He focused on the palm of his remaining left hand. He felt the five hundred meter glowing stake of his fairy spell variant move slightly. If he swung his arm in a side throw, he could fire it like a rocket.

The boy seemed to have noticed him.

They did not greet one another.

They only had to accomplish their respective goals.

First, Kamijou and the girl’s acrobike shot past Fiamma.

The red-haired man stared straight forward.

The purple-robed pursuer also seemed to have noticed Fiamma of the Right.

There was no need to greet him with a nod.

Part 13

One of them was a true Magic God and the other was a red-haired man who had wished to save the world.

The two of them crossed paths head-on.

Part 14

A deafening sound exploded behind Kamijou.

He braked as hard as he could, felt that was not enough, and pressed the soles of his shoes against the brick walking path.

The acrobike screeched to a stop with a burning smell.

It was over.

Kamijou gulped.

The result was plain as day, but he found it hard to believe what he saw.

He felt dizzy.

Still, he had to accept it.

Otherwise, he could not move on.

After all…

“Kah kah.”

He heard parched laughter.

It did not come from Fiamma.

Fiamma’s laughter did not sound like it came from a whistle made of dried grass.

“Kah kah kah! Kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah kah!!”

“Dammit! Fiamma!!”

Shouting was not going to help.

It had already been over by the time they had crossed paths. The giant stake of light had stretched all the way across the large park, but it was shattering like glass and vanishing. No, it was more than just that. The one-armed man rotated quickly through the air. He made more than just one rotation. He was stuck in a wild spin with no thought given to control or a safe landing. He was clearly going to slam into the ground's dried grass without bracing himself.

It was unclear just what kind of battle had unfolded, but the result could not have been more obvious.

Not even Fiamma of the Right had been able to do anything. Not even his prized fairy spell had stopped the High Priest.

Kamijou had caused this.

He could not see the future, so he could not have known what would have happened. Fiamma may not have wanted Kamijou to blame himself, but if Kamijou had not relied on him and had done something else, this would not have happened.

"What are we going to do?"

Mikoto asked the crucial question from the back seat.

"Was that really your final trump card!? Then what are we going to do now!?"

Kamijou was worried about Fiamma.

He wanted to run over and check him for injuries. He wanted to at least make sure he was breathing and had a pulse. But he did not have time. The High Priest was still going all out and sticking around would only get someone else caught in the mummy's rampage. If that happened, the odds of saving Fiamma would drop even further.

So Kamijou spoke up.

"Misaka, call an ambulance here."

"Okay, but what do we do!?"

“That’s obvious.”

He was afraid. His breathing was erratic and his heart was beating painfully hard. He felt like sparks were scattering through his mind and he could barely think.

But…

“I can’t let anyone else get hurt like that!! So I’ll do whatever it takes to beat the High Priest!! That’s the one thing I know for sure!!”

Kamijou and Mikoto’s acrobike cut through the central park with tremendous speed.

Their race with no goal had begun anew.

Cycle Arts Collection 2

Jumper

Difficulty: 2

A basic of the cycle arts. While moving, press down with your weight to lower the suspension and then use the recoil to jump. Your original acceleration will change how much forward momentum the jump has. A must have for any performance using obstacles in the street.

Flail Turn

Difficulty: 3

Build up some speed, lock the front wheel to lift up the back wheel, and twist the handlebars to swing the back wheel around like a bat.

Slope Clear

Difficulty: 2

A variation on the Tightrope. For this one, slide down the sloped railing of an escalator, stairs, or the like. The trick is to lock both wheels to purposefully slip down. Letting the wheels turn provides too much speed and raises the risk of crashing.

Flying D

Difficulty: 5

A variation on the Flail Turn. While swinging the bike around, unlock the front wheel, turn the entire bike on its side, and jump into the air. Ideally, rotate the bike at least once while horizontal. If you do not reorient the bike before landing, you will fall over.

Takeoff

Difficulty: 2

A variation on the R Dash. Instead of unlocking the front wheel, lift the entire bike in a wheelie to launch yourself into the air instead of straight forward. As with the R Dash, it is most important as a lead-in to higher level tricks.

Motor Drive

Difficulty: 1

Grab onto a car, motorcycle, or anything else with an engine to build speed from an external source. The method itself is simple, but due to the danger of an accident that could involve an unrelated individual, use with extreme caution.

Between the Lines 2

That priest truly wished to save the people.

He believed he needed to achieve buddhahood because his human body was insufficient.

He gave up his social status and possessions, dug a small room in the dirt, and did not hesitate to climb inside.

He did everything necessary.

He flawlessly performed the appropriate steps, ignored the chain of reincarnation, and should have risen to buddhahood in a single life.

“I seriously doubt a face so filled with greed belongs to a Buddha.”

“Look, his back is slightly bent. That proves he was begging for his life.”

“He’s collapsed over here, too. We just can’t accept this as a proper self-mummification.”

But he did not achieve buddhahood.

He should have, but no one would accept it.

This had a lot to do with the pathetic squabbles between temples and the strong link between religion and politics in those days. It came down to different factions competing over influence. It would have been a problem if that priest had achieved buddhahood and gathered the support of the people, so some acted to ensure he was made into someone who had not achieve enlightenment and who had suffered as he died.

A mummy who did not achieve buddhahood would not be worshipped.

Whatever the situation, they were not allowed in the same graves as the rest and were buried in a detached area.

As the younger priests carried out the dried corpse, a group snickered off to the side.

They were the court nobles.

It was unclear what exactly they had done, but it was obvious they had hoped for this result.

“Now I can finally rest easy.”

"Honestly, he should have known this would happen if he kept talking about saving all people, regardless of social status."

"The world needs chaos. Otherwise the pathetic commoners would lose any reason to rely on the government."

But remember one thing.

Even if no one would accept it, that priest had completed all of the necessary steps. He had worked to reboot himself as a device to save the people and he had begun to gather the information he needed to achieve that goal.

That mummy gathered it all.

That mummy analyzed it all.

That mummy understood it all.

And he arrived at a conclusion.

"I see. So I did not need the position of a Buddha to save the people. This thought just never occurred to me."

Hearing that sudden voice, one of the young priests gave a surprised shout and let go.

But the dried corpse did not fall to the floor.

No, it was no longer a corpse.

The mummy gently placed his feet on the wooden floor and stood up. He looked across the "people" who could not escape their miserable desires.

"Then I will take on that role. I will be the pathetic, sinful priest who could not abandon his desires and died without reaching perfection. I would not be given a place or a role as a Buddha, so I will become one of the immensely powerful wanderers."

There was nothing they could do.

“I will become exactly what you wanted me to be. I will become a simple High Priest, a mere wandering Buddha.”

The ones who had grinned as they set this up still did not understand the gravity of the situation. One of them shouted to cut him down, another tried to win him over with money, and another broke down crying and desperately begged to be spared.

But it was all useless.

There were likely ways to pacify an evil god, but that High Priest no longer had a role as good or evil. No one knew what he would do and could only watch as he bared his bloody fangs.

Yes.

This was the birth of a new Magic God.

Chapter 3: Beyond the Broken Spider Web — Nightmare_to_Ray_of_Hope.

Part 1

Akikawa Mie had thought she would be relatively safe once she boarded the train.

After leaving the building with the vault, not many people would be thinking of that liquid diamond. Their greed might be stimulated if they caught a glimpse inside her sports bag, but she would be fine otherwise. That was how she saw it.

But reality saw things differently.

She heard a heavy metallic scraping and the train lurched to a halt. She had nothing to hold onto, so she bumped into some young people nearby.

“Dwah!!”

“S-sorry!”

Her reflexive apology reminded her of her father bowing over the phone and that reminder of their genetic link made her feel a little blue. However, the others seemed to be having some trouble, too.

She looked more closely and realized they looked like delinquents. One of them was a skinny boy wearing black clothing and the other was...more of a mystery. The girl wore a yellow mini yukata, had lots of hairpins in her brown hair, and had an unusually dark tan for December.

“Hanzou-sama, don’t tell me you took advantage of the commotion to immerse yourself in a molester’s heaven.”

“That’s a complete lie! Someone else bumped into me!”

“Oh, how heartbreaking!! Beauty is the standard among standards of an Iga woman, yet this was enough for you to lose your self-control? Fine then. I, Kuruwa, shall retrain you from square one starting today!!”

“Please noooo! The seduction techniques of a legit kunoichi will only ensure I never trust a woman again!!”

Emi did not understand, but if they were going to keep the focus off of her, she was fine with that. But before any complaints could erupt from the others on the train, the train’s lights went out in the tunnel. The area was nearly pitch black.

(What? What is this!?)

Everything seemed suspicious. She was worried that masked men were going to break into the train.

A speaker somewhere produced the carefree voice of the conductor.

“Um, a malfunction in a transformer substation near District 5’s central park is affecting our train. We have no word on when it will be repaired. I greatly apologize for the inconvenience, but please follow our instructions and make your way to the tunnel’s emergency exit. I repeat…”

“…”

There was nothing she could trust.

As soon as the tightly shut metal door opened, Akikawa Mie jumped down to the gravel-covered subway track.

“Ah, wait!! It’s dangerous here, so please don’t run! Oh, honestly. If I could see, I could at least teleport over, and…Uiharu! Is the power still not back up!?”

The words of a girl seemingly from Judgment stabbed into Mie's back, but she did not know if the girl was being honest, if it was a trap, or even if the girl was really from Judgment.

The middle school girl ran to the exit with the six trillion yen liquid diamond in her grasp.

Part 2

As Misaka Mikoto sat sideways on the acrobike's back seat with her arms around Kamijou Touma's waist, she felt extremely uneasy.

But not because their lives were in danger.

Nor because their city was being destroyed.

This was a smaller and more personal issue.

She could not accurately put it in words, but that was not because her vocabulary was lacking. Putting it in words would be too much to bear, so she instinctually brought her thoughts to a stop.

It was possible she was a horribly tiny and unsightly individual.

The answer was covered up and hidden, but she accepted it like that.

"It'll be okay," said the pointy-haired boy as he pedaled the acrobike.

He continued facing forward instead of turning back toward her.

He spoke with his back to her.

"Sorry about getting you wrapped up in all this, but I've always managed to get by somehow or other. I'm sure I'll figure something out this time too. I'll get you back to where you belong, so there's nothing to worry about."

He may have had no proof of that.

He may have been reassuring himself as much as her. He would protect her, protect that underclassman, protect the girl. He may have been placing himself in that role as a desperate attempt to restrain his uncontrollable heart.

But…

Something sharp stabbed into Mikoto’s chest as soon as she heard it.

She knew that all too well.

Part 3

First, they had to double check their location.

“Um, we’re in District 5’s central park, so the neighboring districts are 1, 4, 6, 18, and 23! We definitely can’t go to District 1 because the administrative facilities are gathered there or to District 6 because it’s a giant amusement park. Who knows how much damage it would cause if we led him there!!”

“District 23.”

Kamijou forced out the words as he pushed his body past its limits to pedal the acrobike after using up most of his stamina.

“District 23 is filled with aerospace facilities, right!? That would be the best place for a confrontation with the High Priest! At the very least, a flat launch site won’t get anyone else involved and they should have plenty of firefighting equipment in case of an emergency!!”

“Then are we going to take the shortest route again!? He’ll catch up to us if we move in a straight line!!”

Rather than take the shortest route, they could cut through District 18 on their way to District 23.

But wouldn’t that mean they were selecting that district to be trampled on by the High Priest for their own convenience? Could they allow that?

(What is it I want right now?)

Kamijou thought as he gritted his teeth.

(It isn't distance or a specific location. Those are meaningless.)

It was time.

He wanted time to think.

(It doesn't matter if we're only ten centimeters in front of the High Priest. He can even overtake us for all I care. …But only if he doesn't know we're there and we get the time to come up with a plan.)

"Ho ho. Are you youngsters having an intimate discussion on methods of murder?"

"!?"

Before, the High Priest had been approaching from behind.

But now he was running alongside them.

(Dammit! Are my legs getting heavy because I'm more tired than I thought!? If you're going to modify it this much, why not make it a full-blown electric motorcycle!?)

"Hoi."

That carefree word was all it took for the earth to split open and reveal an arm large enough to grab a building. It made a horizontal strike.

Kamijou quickly jumped upwards with Mikoto still on the back seat.

But Kamijou had "waited" just a moment to draw the High Priest in as much as possible.

"It might be miniscule in comparison…"

What might be?

The High Priest must have wondered that without a hint of worry.

“But it’s time you had a taste, High Priest!!”

It happened only a moment later.

“Oh, is that a concrete mixer? Bfh!?”

Once the giant arm missed, it tore into the industrial truck parked on the side of the road. The concrete was constantly rotated to prevent it from hardening, so it poured out and onto the High Priest’s head.

No matter how much of a monster he was, he could not do anything when his eyes were covered.

The acrobike landed and Kamijou kicked at a metal pole sticking up from the sidewalk.

Technically, it was the lid to a fire hydrant.

The deep sound of the released water reverberated in his gut and it sprayed upwards like a fountain. As the High Priest awkwardly and unsteadily walked forward, he moved right into the spray of water. The dried mummy’s body was blasted several meters straight up by the intense pressure. The gray concrete soaking his clothing was stripped away.

But neither the concrete nor the water was meant to be a finishing blow.

To pull the final trigger, Kamijou glared at the falling High Priest and gave a yell.

“Misaka!! Use a lightning spear!!”

“Ohhh, I see. Okay!!”

The explosive zapping sound itself felt like a deadly weapon that squeezed at the heart.

Not only was that a one billion volt blast, but his entire body was soaked with water to raise his conductivity. What would happen to someone in that situation?

Instead of just having their heart stopped, a normal person would have been roasted alive.

But even after all that…

“Ho ho.”

They heard lighthearted laughter.

The unpleasant sweat pouring from Kamijou’s back contrasted that jocular tone.

“Uho hoi☆”

“Goddammit!!!!!!”

Kamijou clenched his teeth shut to cut off his heavy breathing and focused on pedaling.

He was adlibbing everything.

Could he really say he had been satisfied with that previous attack?

Could he really call that the best he had to offer?

It was true a Saint may not have escaped unharmed. God’s Right Seat, Thunder God Thor, or Marian Slingeneyer may have looked concerned. He may have done an excellent job of putting together that counterattack on the fly. But could he really say it was enough firepower when up against someone on the level of Othinus?

And…

If he had had ten or even just five more seconds to think, was it possible he could have put together an even more effective attack?

The Magic God was approaching from behind like a massive bomb, but they could not hide and take their time planning a counterattack. If they stopped, they would definitely be taken out, but they had no idea what awaited them if they kept running.

What if a tanker truck was stopped up ahead? What if a line of kindergarteners was waiting at a traffic light? What if a crowd of people had gathered for a concert or parade? What if they ran into another Magic God?

He did not know what waited up ahead.

He did not know what would happen.

That prevented him from preparing for his next action. They could only go with the flow and their turn to act never came.

(I have to do something!!)

At that moment, he saw something while pedaling the bike. He spotted something.

“Hey, stop! Let go! Give that back!!”

“Hell, yeah. This really is the liquid diamond! Ha ha. This thing’s worth six trillion? Really!? And I thought this was gonna be a bad day when the building started flying!!”

“We really can do anything now that the security lines are down. Damn. Maybe we should’ve checked through that broken vault a little more.”

As soon as he heard it, Kamijou Touma locked both wheels, bringing the acrobike to a rapid stop.

Powerful tension burned into the atmosphere.

“Why are you stopping!?” asked Mikoto from the back seat.

"*When the building started flying*? It sounds like that girl was caught up in the trouble that the High Priest…no, that we caused. I don't know the details, but someone's been taking advantage of the confusion."

"…"

Tokiwadai Middle School's Ace looked between two different points.

The first was the middle school girl surrounded by a group of college students. The second was the rampaging mummy charging their way.

Kamijou had to understand how dangerous their situation was.

He may have understood it far better than her since she had only gotten dragged into it.

But…

"Misaka, can I make one – just one – incredibly selfish request?"

"What is it?"

She urged him on even though she was pretty sure she knew what it was.

The boy gave the exact answer she had been expecting.

"*I want to save that girl right this instant.*"

She smiled without meaning to.

It came out of nowhere. He was ignoring their current predicament. The fear of the High Priest had to have permeated his very being, but he still looked away from the approaching mummy.

However, Mikoto did not need to analyze why she was smiling.

She simply gathered strength in the arms wrapped around his waist and gave her answer.

“Don’t worry. I would’ve had to punch you if you *hadn’t* said that.”

Nothing more was needed. They did not even need to discuss what they would do.

Kamijou forcefully turned the acrobike in a new direction.

He charged full speed toward the other commotion they had created.

Part 4

What happened in that instant was extremely simple.

An acrobike running at full speed collided with the college student holding the liquid diamond’s storage tube.

It may have been a light bicycle, but it was still moving at over sixty kph.

The front wheel dug into Kenzan’s side and he really did bend into a shallow V shape.

“Ghgah!? Bhaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhh!?”

He was sent flying.

He had been holding the storage tube up out of reach, so it was left behind like a game of Daruma Otoshi. Akikawa Mie grabbed it and tossed it from hand to hand like she was juggling it.

“Wah, wah.”

Meanwhile, the rest of the college group was not happy.

“What!? Are they after it, too!? Did everyone have the same idea!?”

Kamijou ignored them and shouted to only the middle school girl.

“Hold on to that and get down!! He’s coming!!”

He did not have time to explain any further. He pedaled with all his might and left with Mikoto.

“Eh? Ehh!? Wait, where are you going? I thought you were helping me!?”

Mie felt abandoned, but she soon realized he had been telling the truth.

The High Priest arrived.

That monstrous mummy charged through, destroying the entire landscape as he did so.

It was like fire racing along a trail of gasoline.

The Magic God accurately followed the route Kamijou and Mikoto had taken and ran right into the college group that was standing there completely defenseless.

“Abhaaaaahh!!!???”

“E-eeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeek!?”

One flew through the air and slammed into a tree. The other seemed to have escaped harm by falling tearfully to the ground. His legs seemed to have given out.

“Kyah!!”

Akikawa Mie held onto the liquid diamond’s storage tube and held down her short skirt as she blankly watched that disastrous storm move on.

Finally, she bowed just once.

(I have no idea what just happened…)

She then started running as quickly as she could. She could not afford to stick around.

As she did, that show of good will filled her heart with warmth.

The impression she was left with may have seemed strange to some people.

(*I was just saved by an extremely powerful old man.*)

Part 5

“Oh, no,” said Kamijou while pedaling the acrobike as hard as he could.

He knew the pointless speaking would interrupt his breathing, but he could not erase the unease rising from his chest.

“Oh, no. Oh, no! Oh, no!! He’s even closer than before!!”

“Uho hoi☆ I finally caught a glimpse of it, Kamijou Touma. Now, I’m getting excited. So what kind of selfishness will you present this Magic God next?”

He did not have time to listen to the High Priest’s nonsense.

If they were caught, it was all over. He had known that before taking the detour.

Mikoto gave a frantic shout as she looked down at her cellphone’s map.

“Wait!! If we keep going this way, we’ll reach a railroad crossing known for causing traffic jams!!”

“Then what are we supposed to do!?”

“For now, turn left!!”

He did as he was told and sharply turned the handlebars, but that was only a reflexive reaction to the situation. He was not thinking for himself about how to change the rails of destiny.

And as soon as he made the turn, something kicked at the acrobike's front wheel.

It was a hurdle made from a line of three red cones and a plastic pole lying on its side.

It was clearly meant to keep people out.

Up ahead, he saw an obvious construction site and the acrobike drove right into a pit that was four stories deep.

The large rectangular opening was larger than a school's twenty-five meter pool.

Kamijou could only look down at the work lights installed at the bottom of the pit to know how deep it was, but that slight information was enough to make him shrink back in fear.

For a while, his sense of gravity vanished.

His sense of time also disappeared.

As time seemed to stretch out infinitely, he guessed they were constructing a multi-level crossing so the railroad could pass below instead of causing traffic jams. He even had time to wonder if they were building a new underground mall while they were at it.

There was a lot he wanted to say, but he only spoke the first phrase that came to mind.

"Misaaaaka."

"B-blame the map!!"

Their sense of time soon returned and the boy and girl were filled with fear and the tremendous Gs of the fall.

Part 6

"Hm?"

The purple-robed mummy came to a stop after turning a corner.

Part 7

Kamijou and Mikoto were thrown out into the pit, but they did not dive straight down.

To lower their speed as much as possible, Kamijou pressed the acrobike's wheels against the side wall. With some help from the gyros, he forced the tires to dig into the nearly vertical wall. Rubber screamed as they slid to the bottom instead of simply falling. Kamijou was too much of a beginner to know, but this was the Rapid S, one of the most difficult cycle arts.

Even so, he nearly bit his own tongue when they landed.

The powerful suspension caused the acrobike to hop back up and Mikoto floated into the air a bit.

The electrically-assisted bicycle somehow regained its balance while swerving in repeated S-shapes. The ground was mostly flat concrete, but some of it was more like rough gravel. Still, they did not blow a tire.

However, Kamijou was more worried about pursuit than the tires. While pedaling, he looked back again and again, using the work lights to see when the High Priest would show up.

And…

"He…isn't following us?"

Afraid to stop, he continued pedaling without a destination in mind.

Mikoto also looked back in confusion.

"I doubt that monster would be afraid to jump down because of the height."

Was there a meaning behind it?

Or was he trying to confuse them with meaningless actions?

They had no evidence for either option, so the phenomenon alone was not enough for them to relax.

And it seemed they did not have much time anyway.

A high-pitched beeping came from the acrobike.

“What is it now!?”

“Something’s flashing on the handlebar grip. The green light just turned orange,” said Kamijou while pedaling. “That’s for the acrobike’s battery. Is it running out!?”

Losing their means of transportation would be disastrous here, so Kamijou frantically reached for the battery pack attached to the frame and pulled out a cable like the ones on vacuum cleaners.

Mikoto looked confused.

“Do they have recharging stations in construction sites!?”

“Look at the plug. A normal household outlet is enough and there are lights all around here. We should be able to recharge if we have half an hour. We should probably recharge as much as we can while the High Priest is gone.”

He applied the acrobike’s brakes.

With the disk-shaped gyros on either side of the two wheels, the acrobike did not fall over even when it came to a complete stop and the two of them quickly stepped off.

They needed half an hour.

If they had that long, they could escape the current danger.

But the very next moment, the Magic God rushed straight in, breaking through all the bedrock.

His incredibly violent arrival was not going to leave even the terrain behind.

The dirt writhed like a living creature and threatened to swallow up Kamijou and Mikoto as they stood there defenseless.

“!?”

“Get on, Misaka!!”

Kamijou himself also hopped onto the acrobike. As soon as he felt the weight on the back seat, he pedaled as fast as he could. Sometimes pieces of rock larger than refrigerators were scattered about, sometimes they flew overhead, and sometimes they rolled in front of the acrobike to block their way. Kamijou pedaled the bicycle out of pure desperation. He used the cycle art named Lunatic G. To avoid the obstacles, he used centrifugal force to shift from the floor to the wall for a few seconds.

They could not recharge and they had no idea how long the battery would last.

“Ho ho.”

They were pursued by what looked like a giant maw.

The wrinkled old man’s voice reached them from beyond the dirt filing the entire tunnel.

“Ho ho ho. Uho hoiii☆”

“Dammit!!”

Tunnels branched off here and there, but a commercial map app could not tell them where they led. Of course, that was not surprising when the entire area under construction did not show up.

They were fleeing with everything they had, but where did this tunnel lead?

What if it led to a dead end?

“Wh-what do we do!? We don’t know the way and the battery’s about to die!!”

“Misaaaka, can you try putting this plug in your mouth?”

“Don’t joke!! The battery pack would probably overheat and explode!!”

The dirt that was crushing and breaking through everything was right behind them now. They even felt a gust of wind just like when a subway train passed by. A human body would be destroyed instantly if it was swallowed up. Not even controlling rebar and metal beams with magnetism would be enough to avoid being buried alive.

“What is with this guy? He can move around in a mummy’s body, he can brush aside my Railgun barehanded, he can swing around buildings, and now he he’s trying to crush this entire tunnel!! The mass he can use is on an entirely different scale! …It feels like he can do anything. Is it a waste of time to even give it serious thought!?”

“…”

“Hey! Are you listening!?”

Mikoto shouted from behind, but Kamijou remained silent.

That was not it. There was something more important than what she was talking about.

He could not let himself be distracted by the impressive visual. He could not lose sight of what he needed to think about first.

“*How did he know where we were*?”

“What?”

“He must have lost sight of us when we first came down here. But why? …No, that isn’t what we need to think about. Right, that’s right. When we left my school and when we were talking with Fiamma through the spiritual item, he immediately interfered. Ahh! For that matter, how did he locate my school in the very, very beginning!?”

Kamijou left Mikoto behind as he lost himself in his own thoughts.

It did not matter how powerful the High Priest was if he could not locate them. Unlike Othinus at full power, he was not attacking by distorting the phase or the world. While they could not defeat this Magic God, it at least gave them some time to think. And if they thought and thought, they could always find some deeper rules.

Where could they go to escape the High Priest?

What could they do to defeat a Magic God?

That was why he could not let this go. He had to shift from passive to active. To alter the rails of destiny themselves instead of simply going with the flow, he had to discover and break down those rules.

“Does he know where we are once he gets within a certain range? Can he detect us if we stay in the same place for a certain amount of time? No, that isn’t it. Give it more thought. There has to have been an obvious point in common. Where did he pick up our tracks… Wait, our tracks? It can’t be…”

After gathering his thoughts, Kamijou looked up in surprise.

They continued through the upwards sloping tunnel.

“It can’t be!”

“What is it!?”

“We might be able to do this after all. As long as this battery holds out!!”

He leaned even more of his weight on the pedals.

The mummy High Priest pursued them with a deluge of dirt.

The noisy warning continued beeping.

A white light appeared in front of them.

It was the tunnel's exit.

Part 8

The dirt carried by a powerful gust of wind made it visible.

The dirt blasted from the tunnel's exit like when cleaning a bath tub's pipes. The people walking on a peaceful riverside path looked over in surprise, but the High Priest was not bothered by that.

"Hm."

The mummy stepped onto the carefully maintained bricks of the walking path, split his dried skin, and tilted his head.

A rhythmic sound came from a work ship passing by on the cold river.

The High Priest observed all of his surroundings.

"I've lost his signal again."

Part 9

A mere fifteen meters in front of the High Priest, Kamijou lay face down on the deck of the work ship noisily travelling along the river. He had used a major trick known as Swing J to make a large jump from the bank.

"It's dirt."

"Dirt?"

Mikoto was lying alongside him.

It may have been a sign of her unease, but without realizing it, her hand was tightly holding onto the bottom of Kamijou's coat.

They had done it all to hide from the High Priest using the raised edge of the ship.

After reaching the end up the slope, the acrobike had shot from the tunnel like it was a ramp. Landing on the work ship had been a complete coincidence.

But Kamijou felt the result would have been the same had they fallen into the cold water.

"When you think about it, he's been controlling dirt this entire time. In that case, we should have assumed he was searching for us using the same thing he uses to attack."

He finally breathed a sigh of relief.

"While pedaling the acrobike, my feet were off the ground. When speaking with Fiamma over the spiritual item and when preparing to recharge the acrobike in the tunnel just now, the High Priest attacked the instant I placed my feet on the ground. It's like he's a part of the dirt or like the ground is his skin."

Mikoto did not seem to understand what he meant by becoming "a part of the dirt".

That was not surprising. While esper powers and magic were both supernatural, the science and magic at their base were entirely different. It might have angered a magician to hear it, but Academy City's level of education was on an entirely different level from that of magicians.

Still, she managed to keep the conversation going.

"If that's true, if you keep your feet off the ground…"

“He won’t know where I am. We just have to stay in the water or on this boat.”

Of course, it would all be for naught if the High Priest actually saw them, but they could at least escape his radar or GPS-like search.

(Of course, this is all assuming it isn’t just an act, waiting for us to reach the wrong conclusion and leave an opening.)

He could not completely deny that possibility.

He would remain cautious, but he felt it was unlikely.

He thought back to the Othinus incident. If the High Priest was a true Magic God, Kamijou doubted he would put together that kind of trick against a lowly human. He would use every means available to him and crush his enemy with overwhelming force. They were called gods because they could do that.

“The High Priest is… Good. It looks like I was right.”

Kamijou poked just his head above the edge of the work ship to check.

It also looked like they could deal with the acrobike’s battery. The ship’s workers had been taken aback by their sudden appearance, but Kamijou had bowed down and gotten permission to use one of the ship’s power plugs.

The workers seemed to think they were from an extreme video site. They had received a quick lecture, but it was not being treated as a crime.

(We finally have time to think.)

Kamijou sat exhausted on the deck.

This could be the beginning of shifting from passive to active, from escape to counterattack, and from going with the flow to altering the rails of destiny themselves.

(And I can think over everything again.)

He shut his eyes and went back over everything that had happened.

The mummy High Priest had accurately pursued an acrobike as it fled as quickly as a car, he had wielded giant arms of dirt and mud, he had attacked with high-rise buildings filled with innocent people, and he had crushed a tunnel with dirt as he approached. He was a frightening opponent who did everything on an extraordinary scale and could fill Academy City with destruction if not dealt with.

But…

(*I'm not afraid of you.*)

Kamijou Touma opened his eyes and confidently reached his conclusion.

(This isn't like with Othinus. Back then, I felt like countless fish hooks were caught in my soul and dragging it from my body and I felt like my very existence was being torn away, but I don't sense that madness from you!!)

Part 10

Misaka Mikoto slowly exhaled on the work ship.

It did not matter that it was temporary. They had at least managed to escape the High Priest's pursuit and they had time to think things over.

But thinking was not always helpful.

(…)

Everything she had been trying not to think about swelled up inside her chest. Losing herself in that work had stopped these negative thoughts, but they had started up again.

She could not put it in words.

If she did, she would be forced to face her own ugliness.

She shook her head and forced down the phrase that was rising from her throat.

She then turned to Kamijou.

“H-hey, let’s talk about what exactly we’re going to-…”

That was when she saw it.

She saw a woman whose chocolate-colored skin was hidden only by bandages and a girl with pale skin who wore a mini China dress.

Those women had appeared, sitting on either side of the pointy-haired boy.

Mikoto's mouth flapped opened and closed, but the women did not seem to care.

They leaned in on Kamijou from either side and each grabbed one of his hands.

They then pressed those hands against their soft chests.

"Oh, dear. Not even Imagine Breaker is enough. I had thought I would retrieve my original power if the spell inside me was broken, but that power seems to have already completely disappeared. I suppose even this power can't remake an object that was burnt to ashes by a magical fire. ...Niang-Niang, what are you doing?"

"What do you mean, Nephthys? I'm trying Imagine Breaker on myself just like you."

"Then why are you using his left hand? It's only in his right."

"Oh, I thought any body part worked as long as you touched your breasts with it."

"Niang-Niang, that's completely backwards."

Something burst from Mikoto's temple.

If she had to say what irritated her the most, it was how the pointy-haired boy did nothing to stop the sudden situation.

"What. Do. You. Think. You're-...!!!???"

She never finished her furious shout.

Before she could, Niang-Niang (who was still meaninglessly pressing Kamijou Touma's left hand to her flat chest) pointed her baggy sleeve toward Mikoto in annoyance.

That was all she did.

A thick blade shot from her sleeve and mercilessly stabbed into the center of Mikoto's chest.

"Wha-?"

She had no idea what this meant.

She was filled with confusion.

"Ah?"

The first thing to pierce into the girl's chest looked like a crescent-shaped blade on the end of a spear.

But that was not the only one. Now that Mikoto was pinned in place, a great number of weapons shot out to tear, pierce, and slice through every part of her body.

A frenzied rush of dull sounds continued for some time.

She felt no pain and she shed no blood, but she felt dizzy at the definite fact that she had been "stabbed". This was not a mental manipulation like the #5 used. This was physically happening. Dark unease oozed out from the depths of her mind and quickly spread to every corner of her brain.

The result had already arrived, but it was such an extreme situation that the physical phenomena could not keep up.

It was just like a shockwave reaching the surroundings only after an object had moved at supersonic speeds. It was like the rumble of thunder arriving only a few seconds after the flash of lightning.

So once the situation caught up, would she already be...?

“Misaka!!”

That was when the pointy-haired boy swung his right hand around. He swept aside the countless weapons connecting the China dress’s sleeve to Mikoto’s upper body. Every last one of the weapons was thoroughly destroyed like fragile glass.

To protect her now that she was freed, Kamijou stepped forward to hold back the brown bandaged women and the pale mini-China dress girl.

(What…?)

Mikoto ran her hands along her entirely unharmed body.

(What was that!?)

“Ahh, ahh. It’s no use thinking about it too much. Destroying them all at once like Kamijou Touma did is the best plan.”

The mini China dress girl giggled.

She did not seem bothered that her weapons had been destroyed.

“After all, each and every one of my Pao-Pei has a different effect. If I release them all at once like that, you can’t exactly sit around analyzing each one, now can you?”

“Pao…?”

“Ah ha ha. Sorry. I guess using my own terminology would leave you confused, wouldn’t it? They aren’t from any religious or historical texts. Instead, they’re the weapons used by the sages in an ancient Chinese novel, but there are plenty of similar things lying around. For example, the sages would have a fake funeral to cut their ties to their earthly life and they would place their own staff in the coffin in their place. *My country is filled with tools that have no official origin. There are over one hundred legendary foods that supposedly make you immortal if you eat them*. When you have so much stuff, you have to categorize them and manage them all, so I just wanted a convenient name and category.”

“Niang-Niang, I don’t think that’s what they were surprised about.”

“Neh? Then what were those shocked looks for???”

To Kamijou, that puzzled atmosphere felt like a different sort of pressure from any of his previous powerful foes.

“What are you two?”

He stayed in front of Mikoto as he asked, but neither of them bothered getting up as they calmly answered.

“I’m Nephthys and this is Niang-Niang.”

“You can think of us as the High Priest’s partners, Kamijou-chan.”

Part 11

The High Priest’s partners.

The true Gremlin.

Magic Gods on the same level as Othinus.

That was enough for Kamijou to feel dizzy. Their hands were already more than full with the High Priest. They had been about to start a discussion to find a possible way to defeat him if one existed at all, but now the number of Magic Gods had increased. And not just by one, but by two.

Based on what the High Priest had said and done, Kamijou assumed they could not freely add in a new phase to the world like Othinus had done at full power. Still, there were three of them now. Without even thinking about phases, wasn’t that enough of a force to split the planet in two with brute strength?

On top of that, they were on the same level as the High Priest, but they were not complete copies of him and all his characteristics. He would have to redo everything from the beginning. He would have to analyze what Nephthys and Niang-Niang used as Magic Gods and find a weakness in it. And there was always a chance the High Priest would go on a rampage and fill Academy City with destruction in the meantime.

He was shorthanded. His mental resources were nearly overloaded.

He had no idea where to even begin.

“You don’t have to worry.”

The brown-skinned bandage-wearing Nephthys laughed.

“We aren’t thinking about destroying Academy City right this instant or anything. Didn’t the High Priest tell you what the true Gremlin wants?”

“You mean that stuff about having me score the distortions and destiny created when you Magic Gods fight over resources? And in exchange for a guaranteed wish or prayer. You aren’t interested in world domination or wiping out the human race. You just want to give me those special privileges for some nonsensical peace of mind!”

“Are you prepared to give us your answer?”

Kamijou wondered what would happen if he was not prepared.

Would they use the High Priest’s strategy and spread destruction until he changed his mind?

He tensed at that thought, but Niang-Niang shrugged and cut into the conversation.

“C’moooon. You don’t have to look so horrified. Huh? Nephthys, do you think maybe the High Priest scared him a little too much???”

"Well, he is the type that lets the blood rush to his head and ruins the plan he was working on five seconds before, so it isn't that surprising. He really does like making his own convenient interpretations of impermanence and inevitable decline."

"What are you…talking about?"

"Sorry if we scared you, *boy*."

Nephthys pressed her index finger against her slender chin without looking remotely troubled.

"But we have no intention of starting any kind of trouble in Academy City…or in *this world* at all."

"How can you be so certain?"

"Because we have no reason to."

She said it so readily.

"I can't speak for the other Magic God, but I quite like Academy City. Even as one of the lives crawling along the ground, you dream of the stars in the night sky and draw up diagrams for them all. You've even reached the level of building a mass driver and landing an unmanned probe on a comet by matching its one hundred thousand kph relative speed."

She removed her fingertip from her brown chin and casually reached her hand toward the sun in the blue sky.

"The stars can be plucked from the sky so easily, so why are you so desperate to reach them? It's not even remotely logical, but humans are creatures filled with that sort of passion, aren't they? That movement of your hearts is the one thing I'm honestly jealous of."

Niang-Niang was struggling not to laugh as she listened in.

"Neeephthyyys, you're really, really looking down on them."

“Oh, dear. But my experience tells me this leaves them with a more favorable impression of me.”

“Well, we are gods. It’s true people expect us to crush them underfoot instead of lowering ourselves to their level.”

Kamijou and Mikoto were right in front of them, but neither Nephthys nor Niang-Niang paid them much attention. There was a powerful division between them like with a waiter in the middle of a party.

“I got off topic, didn’t I?”

“Why are you even here?”

“Didn’t you hear from the High Priest? Thanks to ‘him’, we’re weakened at the moment. We had hoped your Imagine Breaker could do something about that, but it didn’t work. Not that it really matters.”

“We’re not the ones this is a real problem for. I just can’t figure out what ‘he’ was thinking by dragging us into the real world in this incomplete state. *You could say we’re in a state where we can destroy the world but lack the strength to recreate it afterwards*.”

“…!?”

“Niang-Niang.”

“Ah ha ha! Sorry, sorry. You sure were traumatized by that business with Othinus, Kamijou-chan!!”

Niang-Niang held her small belly with her baggy sleeves and burst out laughing with tears in her eyes. Nephthys could only sigh in exasperation.

“Sorry about making fun of you. At any rate, we’ll deal with our first goal on our own, but I suppose we do have a second goal we could use your help with.”

"I won't become your scorer. I'm sick of thinking about turning the human race into tropical fish for something as ridiculous as 'peace of mind'. I have no interest in making any wishes or prayers."

"*That can wait until another time.*" Nephthys laughed. "The current issue is the High Priest."

"The High Priest?"

"Even you can tell he's on a complete rampage, can't you? But that doesn't represent the overall will of the true Gremlin. We can't have you thinking we're all like that."

"Th-then…"

Hesitantly, Mikoto finally spoke up from behind Kamijou.

"Why can't you deal with him? You know that weird old man, right? Then you go capture him and leave!"

Nephthys and Niang-Niang's response was incredibly simple.

They acted like Academy City's #3 was not even there.

"We want you to stop the High Priest, so we'll give you the information you need. But don't expect us to do anything directly."

"Wait…"

Kamijou cut in without thinking.

Mikoto was still so shocked she did not have it in her to speak again.

But the two Magic Gods did not seem to mind very much.

"Well, if you tell us to do it, we will. *But only if we receive that prayer from our cute little Kamijou-chan*. Of course, that would end up with at least Academy City…no, this entire archipelago at the bottom of the sea. You know why, don't you? A fight between us and the High Priest would be a battle between Magic Gods."

“Wait.”

The two Magic Gods were entirely cheerful.

They sounded just like someone speaking to a friend in class.

But that was exactly why each and every word caused Mikoto to shrink down.

They felt like physical blows to the girl who was left all alone.

The two Magic Gods were cruelly erasing her presence from their mind and acting like she was not there.

“I said wait, Nephthys!!”

The next thing he knew, Kamijou had grabbed the bandages corresponding to the brown woman’s collar.

What would happen if he made a single mistake against a Magic God? Even that concern had been knocked from his mind.

“Oh, dear.”

He glared at her from close range, but Nephthys’s expression did not change.

Kamijou Touma felt a strange prickling surround him, *as if something invisible were stabbing into his skin.*

Still, he did not back down.

He had no reason to do so.

“What will you do?”

A teasing voice cut in from the side. Niang-Niang hid her mouth behind a baggy sleeve and a bewitching smile filled her eyes.

“Of course, it doesn’t matter to us if you say you don’t want any divine advice. If you want to do it all on your own, go right ahead.

But can you really manage that? You don't even know the basic structure of the High Priest's mummy body."

"…"

Kamijou could not answer.

A silent confrontation between human and Magic God continued for a while.

"Fine, then."

Misaka Mikoto was the one who finally spoke up.

The Magic Gods had not been counting her as part of the conversation, so she spoke to Kamijou.

"Let's use everything available to us. This is no time to be picky."

"Misaka…"

"But we'll outdo them in the end. We can put up with it if we assume that. So let's keep the conversation going. If the High Priest interrupted up after all this, it would make me wonder what we were doing this whole time."

He looked like he had just bitten into something bitter, but Kamijou finally let go of Nephthys's collar.

He would respect her decision, but his expression made it clear he did not like it.

Meanwhile, Nephthys's expression remained unchanged. She had no reason to change it.

"You don't like it, but you can't refuse us, can you?"

"What of it?"

"You have always been greedy when it comes to victory, so you tend to use any means available to you. *And right now you have someone* *behind you to protect*. You would never worry about appearances here.”

Nephthys laughed as she continued.

“Now, how about we celebrate our common goal by talking about the High Priest?”

Part 12

It was a carefree scene.

The purple-robed High Priest used his golden sword as a staff to walk along the river.

He did not use a people-clearing field to hide himself.

He did not try to conceal the existence of magic.

He held the position of a Magic God, his presence destroyed the many bonds tying one to the world, and yet *his living mummy body* shattered everyone’s common sense simply by breathing. But he gave no thought to any of that. If any problems occurred, he could crush them with his strength and none of the beings living in this world could stop him. His entire body was overflowing with that pride.

“Now, where did they get off to?”

Was there really any meaning in the words he spoke?

When it came down to it, a Magic God like him had no real reason why he had to settle things with Kamijou Touma right away. His mummy body would continue to function indefinitely. Just as Othinus had lived a long, long mind-numbing amount of time to find someone who understood her, it did not entirely matter to him as long as it was all resolved in the very end. Of course, he was nothing but a disaster to those who only had a one hundred year lifespan and were being constantly targeted in this normal world. In other words, the wait may have been the most frightening part.

Kamijou and Mikoto had been desperate to escape the immediate threat, but it may have been even more frightening for him to be out of sight.

But as his pride was based in actual strength, the High Priest was not a patient person. Instead of dangling a line in the water and enjoying a relaxing time fishing, he would swallow up all of the lake's water and grab the fish from the dried lake bottom. That was a Magic God.

After his walk, he suddenly looked up.

He turned in a certain direction and he smiled.

"Ho ho. Looks like they're doing something interesting over there."

Part 13

"As you know…or maybe you don't, but the High Priest is a Magic God from Buddhism."

On the work ship, Nephthys began with that.

"Specifically, from the unique Japanese variety that went through a number of changes after its origin in India and its passage through China and Korea. Now, Kamijou-chan, are you familiar with self-mummification?"

"?"

"Nephthyyys, you're skipping a step in your explanation," cut in Niang-Niang. "In Japanese Buddhism, you can't achieve enlightenment and travel to the Pure Land in a single life, no matter how much you train. It has nothing to do with your social status. By being reborn again and again and going through harsh training each time, you slowwwwly polish your soul and only liberate yourself from your worldly desires in the very, very end. That’s when you become a Buddha. Or that’s the normal route, anyway.”

“There is a way of becoming a Buddha in the limited few decades of a single life and that is self-mummification.”

Were they saying the High Priest had performed that self-mummification ceremony and become a Magic God?

But what exactly did that ceremony entail?

“The process itself is simple. You can tell from his body, right?”

“It’s basically the Japanese version of a mummy. And strangely, they don’t even remove the blood or organs. They only close themselves in a dark room and dry up. Speaking as the Egyptian version, it makes me worry they would rot from the inside before drying out.”

That surprised Kamijou.

It was true the High Priest did not look normal, but it was still a shock to have it confirmed by someone else.

“Then he was killed in order to artificially create a Magic God!?”

“Don’t be silly. He closed himself in the underground room and chose to starve to death. It wouldn’t be ‘self’-mummification otherwise.”

Niang-Niang’s nonchalant comment left Kamijou even more dumbfounded.

Nephthys did not seem to want to stick on any one point, so she continued on to the next one.

“That’s why he has a connection to dirt. In self-mummification, the priest wanting to rid himself of worldly desires closes himself in an underground room, essentially burying himself alive, and continues forming mudra and chanting sutra to the end. That creates the mummy. What seeped from his corpse as he dried filled the surrounding dirt and created a connection there."

"All around the world, people think of the heavenly gods being up in the sky and the sinners being below the earth, but not many cultures view dirt itself as unclean. Take Japan's Shinto for example. But Shinto and Buddhism have mixed and contaminated each other, so that influenced the High Priest, too."

The dirt.

The underworld.

A Magic God who could draw out and control the space that had starved him to death.

"Why did he…?"

"?"

"Why did he go that far?"

This had nothing to do with strategizing.

It was an honest question.

Nephthys replied as if it was nothing.

"Isn't that obvious? The only reason any priest aims to rid himself of his worldly desires is to save the people. In other words, he wanted to save the entire world."

"Wha-…?"

"Ah ha ha! Pretty much all of the Magic Gods are the same, y'know? But the salvation our overwhelming power brought was twisted. Or I guess you could say salvation from an individual is no different from *an absolute dictatorship*. Then again, the High Priest's story may be one of the worst."

“Didn’t you find it odd?” asked Nephthys like this was nothing more than gossip. “There are a few peculiar aspects about the High Priest’s outfit: his purple robe, the glittering golden ornaments, the collar rising like flames, and the sword made of pure gold.”

“What about it?”

“But he has never once swung that sword, has he?”

Now that it had been pointed out to him, Kamijou realized it was true.

The High Priest had made giant arms of dirt and mud, swung buildings around, and crushed an underground tunnel. Kamijou had been distracted by the great impact of those actions, but the High Priest had never used that obvious weapon of his.

“They’re all burial accessories modeled after the Buddhist deity Acala, but they don’t represent his own choices. After he died, a faction that did not want him to become a Buddha sabotaged his attempt. No one adorned with those treasures could have abandoned their desire, so no one would think he could have achieved enlightenment. It was basically a blatant negative campaign against him.”

“Kee hee hee. In other words, he has the body of a Buddha but wasn’t given the position of a Buddha, so you could call him a wandering Buddha.”

“In polytheistic religions, every god is given a name and a role. The gears of the giant system known as mythology can start turning as long as they have those two things. But the High Priest has neither.”

“He’s a Buddha with no name besides ‘High Priest’. He’s a dangerous gear that can appear anywhere inside an already full box. And worst of all, he still fully intends to save the people.”

“He concluded that what happened to him was ‘the desire of the people’, so he believes he can save the world by acting as someone who could not abandon his petty desires and thus became a Buddha without a role.”

Hearing it was enough to make Kamijou feel faint.

He had run across quite a few magicians in the past and they had all had their unique issues.

But the High Priest was somehow different.

The other magicians had done what they did because something had ended or because they feared something would end, but the High Priest was much more rotten.

He was like a dried and eternally preserved mummy.

Everyone else was working out of fear that their HP would drop to zero, but his alone had already reached negative numbers yet he was still laughing.

“So you can’t convince him to stop.”

Nephthys provided that simple conclusion and her tone made it clear that was not uncommon for someone with that kind of past.

“After all, he’s rotted so much, but he’s perfectly satisfied with where he is ‘now’. If the emperor of the Emperor’s New Clothes was proud of being naked, then there would be no stopping him with words, right?”

“Ah ha ha!! Neeephthyyys ! That doesn’t sound very convincing coming from someone who’s naked except for some bandages!”

“You aren’t any better since you don’t wear any underwear.”

As they spoke back and forth, the two Magic Gods slowly stood up from the ship’s deck.

“Well, despite what I said, if you really you don’t have enough strength, call our names. *If you give an appropriate sacrifice,* we can restrain the High Priest in a direct confrontation between Magic Gods.”

Nephthys laughed.

“That wouldn’t be all that interesting a conclusion, but I suppose it would be somewhat entertaining. After all, it would mean you had accepted the value of a Magic God’s power.”

She held her slender brown hand out to Kamijou.

He could do it now if he wanted.

If he gave up here, she would easily end this incident.

And he would get a taste of cheating.

Once he knew how easy it was, he would feel foolish for ever working at it the old-fashioned way.

That was all it would take to save everyone.

That would not be a problem for anyone, but…

“No!!!!!!”

A sharp yell cut through the gentle downward-sloping atmosphere.

It came from Misaka Mikoto.

Part 14

In that instant, not even she fully knew why she had grabbed Kamijou’s arm.

She had felt it would be dangerous for him to take Nephthys or Niang-Niang’s slender hand.

She had felt he would truly leave for some place she would never be able to reach.

So she did not care how pathetic it was. She did not care if everyone treated her like a weed or stone on the side of the road, if her pride as Tokiwadai Middle School's Ace was torn to shreds, or if Academy City's #3 was entirely useless in the face of a "true conflict".

Magic? Magic God?

She did not understand the words everyone else was using. She could not share in their meaning, she could not imagine what they were talking about, and she could not keep up. That fact was a powerful blow.

But she could put all of that off until later.

She could go through it all bit by bit based on what she did understand.

But that meant she could not allow this.

She could not allow Kamijou Touma to carelessly join forces with these Magic Gods.

Part 15

Misaka Mikoto clung to Kamijou Touma's arm.

She glared at the temptresses like a normal girl.

Only then did the chocolate-colored Magic God give her a puzzled look for the first time.

The girl named Misaka Mikoto finally entered her field of vision.

And…

"That's right."

Nephthys laughed and shook her empty hand in amusement.

“The stars can be plucked from the sky so easily, but you humans feel such passion for such unimportant things.”

“…?”

What did she see in Mikoto and what assessment had she made? Not even Mikoto knew.

But it seemed what had almost amounted to a tackle had lessened the Magic God’s interest.

As if switching to a different set of rails, Nephthys and Niang-Niang stood up.

“I will give you one last piece of divine advice,” said the Magic God. “If you intend to defeat the High Priest with brute strength, then you need to carefully work out the process of his destruction. Make no mistake; that is not a simple difference in physical strength.”

“What?”

“He is a special being that rose to the level of a Buddha in a single life when that normally takes being reborn into countless lives. He is someone who left the proper path of destiny and skipped a level on his own. He can freely manipulate the intersection of the Six Paths, so it would be best not to assume the cause, the process, and the effect are lined up neatly in order.”

She said nothing more.

By the time Kamijou Touma finished blinking his eyes, the Magic Gods were already gone.

Part 16

Kamijou and Mikoto were short on time.

The High Priest had not yet located them. As long as they did not stand on the dirt that made up his turf, their location would not reach him.

But that was not a 100% guarantee.

After all…

“He only has to think about it in reverse.”

“In reverse?”

“How can we stay safe and not step on the ground? If he goes around crushing locations like that, he might eventually realize we’re on the water or on this ship. Once that happens, it’s all over. The chase will begin again.”

They had finally gained some time to think and the Magic Gods named Nephthys and Niang-Niang had given them some information on the High Priest.

If they could not make full use of this short time, they would never turn things around.

Like a fox hunt, they would only be tortured to death at the end of a long, long chase.

“First of all,” began Mikoto. “Do you think there’s any way for us to defeat that High Priest guy?”

“If we can’t, then we have to come up with a way of resolving this without defeating him.”

Kamijou pulled the acrobike’s recharging cable from the ship’s outlet and stored it in the battery pack like with a vacuum cleaner.

"We need to get to District 23."

"Well, I suppose we won't get anyone else involved when it's just large launch sites and runways, but what do we do then!?"

"I have an idea."

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Part 17

"Ow…" someone groaned.

It was Kenzan from the group of college students.

His vision was still flashing in and out, so he shook his head to clear his mind. The area looked like the scene of some horrible disaster, but only two things mattered.

The liquid diamond and the middle school girl were gone.

The stolen P-phone was lying on the ground nearby.

The LCD's protective glass was cracked, but it turned on when he hit the switch.

"Okay, it's working. …We can still chase her down. Good."

The other boys were not far away. Okada was collapsed face-up on the road and Higata was crouched down near him.

"Hey."

"A-ah! Oh, you're okay? I think Okada's in trouble. He's conscious, but he can't seem to get up. He hit his back pretty hard, so I think he might have broken something."

"Shut up. *More importantly,* we're going after the liquid diamond. C'mon."

That should have been obvious, but Higata's mouth hung open.

He froze up for a bit.

"No, wait. What are you saying? 'More importantly'!?"

"Yeah?"

"Sorry, but this isn't the time. We need to do something about Okada. Um, we need to call an ambulance. Where's my phone?"

"Ahh! Sorry, but I'm not letting you report this! If we're stopped here, our six trillion yen'll get away!!"

Higata heard a metallic sound, saw the handgun pulled from the back of Kenzan's pants, and looked up.

When he saw the look in Kenzan's eyes, he made a partial smile.

"You're crazy. You're completely insane."

"Are you coming with me or are going to rest in peace with your friend here? It's your choice."

"…"

Higata bit his lip, looked back and forth between Okada and Kenzan, and finally stood up in resignation.

Taking that as a sign Higata was coming with him, Kenzan moved the handgun away.

"That's more like it."

Part 18

The mummy known as the High Priest raised his head.

A giant glass case sat near the entrance of an arcade. He was pressed up against that crane game machine.

It was filled with strange, round characters that may have been modeled after the Arrowhead Comet that had been gathering attention during its closest approach to Earth.

He must have looked like an old man ignorant of the modern world who had dumped too much money into the game, because a male employee unlocked the door and handed the High Priest one of the strange round stuffed toys.

“You see, old man… Wait, that’s what I should call you, right? Ha ha. Or are you a mumm-…no, it couldn’t be.”

(I sense him.)

Kamijou Touma, his current target, had stepped on the dirt.

He was at a runway or launch site in District 23, but that was a far too obvious location.

It was clearly a trap.

But the High Priest laughed regardless.

It was the opposite.

A Buddhist priest as advanced as him saw no value in actions meant to build something up. The world was a fleeting thing, it was going to end eventually, and the path to virtue was to unhesitatingly cast aside everything. Rather than just seeing the world as fleeting, his heart saw elegance in the destruction itself. This was a unique aesthetic different from the original Buddhism of India.

This was no different.

Impermanence was exemplified by trampling over any and all plans with no plan of his own. Decline was inevitable because the will of god would destroy all the efforts of man. Gathering that which existed to build up one's defenses could not stop the truth brought about by nothingness. They more they built up, the more the High Priest could shine.

So there was no need to think too much about it.

Even the greatest existence would return to nothingness.

He claimed to want peace of mind, but the High Priest's actual vector was pointed elsewhere.

"Just to be clear, these things are worth less than a yen. That's the magic of mass-production if you can believe it. Were you so desperate to get one because your grandchild begged for one? Sorry, but you can get them pretty cheap at any second-hand shop, so…what are you doing!?"

The employee gave a hysteric shout.

The High Priest had pushed the stuffed toy back into his hands.

"I no longer need it. You use it as you wish."

"Use it? And why were you so worked up over getting it, then!?"

"Well," said the mummy without looking back. "Unfortunately, I tend to lose interest in things once I get my hands on them."

That was true of all things for him.

If that boy were to give in to him, the High Priest was sure to immediately behead him without a second thought.

It did not matter if the High Priest was aware he would or not.

Cycle Arts Collection 3

Rapid S

Difficulty: 5

Run horizontally across the edge a cliff with a slope of seventy to eighty degrees and slide down the cliff with both wheels pressed against the wall. It is possible thanks to the gyros, but if one of the wheels leaves the wall even slightly, you will lose the benefit of the gyros and immediately begin to fall.

Lunatic G

Difficulty: 4

A cycle art using the terrain. Build your speed on the ground, press the wheels against a wall running alongside you, and race across the wall for a few seconds. This uses centrifugal force, so terrain like an arch-shaped tunnel is necessary for the transfer. If you continue on up to the ceiling, it becomes the Universe which has a difficulty of 5.

Swing J

Difficulty: 2

Generally refers to a flight of over ten meters after jumping from a slope. It looks fancy, but it doesn't require much skill from the performer because it relies on the terrain and the acrobike's specs. Once the jump exceeds thirty meters, it becomes the Over Kp with a difficulty of 4. Add in a full backflip for the Moonsault with a difficulty of 5.

Between the Lines 3

Wish upon a star☆ Become a sponsor of the unmanned probe Parasatellite 01 and name an unknown jewel! This new campaign is underway!!

Our foundation is accepting sponsors of the unmanned probe Parasatellite 01 which will be launched by a mass driver to investigate the Arrowhead Comet.

The method is simple: either log onto our webpage or use a convenience store's multi-copy machine or ticket vending machine.

One hundred yen per person!

The Arrowhead Comet is rumored to hold the possibility of being a seventh achondrite that does not fit the existing six types. If the samples taken by the Parasatellite 01 prove this theory…wow! The right to name the new jewel will be given to one of you sponsors!

The world's astronomers are paying close attention because the achondrite could be the key to learning the secret of the solar system's birth and the name of the seventh type is sure to spread far and wide as new ones are later discovered.

You can name it after your store, make it a wish for world peace, spread the name of your birthplace, give it your own name, or dedicate it to your lover.

Why not make a wonderful memory in this romantic month of December by entering for your chance to provide the name?

Chapter 4: End of an Unwinnable Battle — A.A.A.

Part 1

Academy City's District 23 specialized in the field of aerospace development and it was covered by flat expanses of gray asphalt. Needless to say, that was to secure as much space as possible for launch sites and runways. The entirely clear blue sky overhead looked like an infinitely open space, but it was scheduled out down to the minute and even second so that countless aircraft of every size could constantly move through it like threads being knit into cloth. Without the digital control guidance, collisions would have occurred constantly.

Also, security drones patrolled the area to eliminate the risk of naturally-occurring bird strikes, plastic bags blown into the air by the wind, or even intentional trouble.

Normally, the boy stepping down from the acrobike would have been detected before the seconds hand made a full circuit of the clock.

That did not happen because of the electrical support of Academy City's #3.

But in that case…

"Ho."

Why was that old man there?

His arms and legs looked like dried branches that had long since forgotten the concept of moisture. His splendidly decorated purple and gold robe stood in stark contrast to his thoroughly worn away body. He also used a pure gold sword instead of a staff.

"So you were waiting for me? Perhaps you were thinking you could turn everything around by fighting in an open space with no risk of damaging your surroundings. …But surely that wasn't all you were thinking."

He did not rush things or act impatiently.

That Magic God walked toward Kamijou Touma at a leisurely pace.

He did not seem to mind that Kamijou was the only one here. He said nothing about Misaka Mikoto's absence.

He showed no concern over a possible cheap trick or trap.

A Magic God was not so small an existence.

"I will ask you however many times it takes, Kamijou Touma."

After reaching a certain distance, the High Priest stopped and faced the pointy-haired boy.

"Those of us from the true Gremlin wish to have you grade our power which inadvertently distorts destiny. You would create the seventh path that does not fit in the other six, you would become the sheath to contain the secret sword of our great power, you would remove the hangnail on our hearts, and you would give us formless peace of mind. And in exchange, you would take the position of the scorer who rules the world's destiny. How about it?"

Kamijou had only a single word to say.

This had not changed from beginning to end.

"No."

"I see."

The High Priest leaned on his sword with one hand and used the other to scratch at the dried side of his tilted head.

Like a child, he seemed truly puzzled how Kamijou had reached that conclusion.

"It is only a matter of sooner or later. You will eventually accept, so the question is how far the damage will spread before you do. I believe I have already told you this many times."

"What…?"

Something was coming.

He would make his case with violence.

"What are you planning now, High Priest!?"

Sensing that, Kamijou put up his defenses, but to someone as powerful as the High Priest, he only looked like a small creature tensing up to weather a storm.

"Is this maybe what you were thinking?" asked the old man. "Your choices always lie in front of you and the infinite possibilities of the future are determined by the choices you will make. Those possibilities include tragedy and comedy, fortune and misfortune, peace and war, and everything else, so you can walk down a path where everyone survives as long as you make the right choices."

The thick asphalt of the runway split apart.

A giant arm rose on either side of the High Priest like towers. As the mud arms wriggled like living creatures, the mummy gave his disinterested conclusion.

"If so, you were too naïve."

It arrived so suddenly.

"Have you forgotten? I have a deep connection with dirt and I have controlled mud to produce a variety of phenomena. But the finite is still finite and I have not altered the conservation of mass. …*What do you think happens underground when this much of the dirt is pulled out?*"

It happened immediately afterwards.

A massive cumulonimbus cloud rose from far beyond the horizon. No, it was gray dust. A mountain of dust like that was created when a building was demolished. Since the earth was round, the cityscape may have normally been hidden by the horizon, but this great cloud of dust was large enough and high enough to overturn that.

This had to go beyond a single building.

The dust was coming from more than one point. Buildings were probably crumbling and collapsing one after another. The amount of dust was growing like the movements of a living creature, like a slithering snake, or like the surface representation of a mole moving through the dirt.

“Uuh…”

Yes.

It followed the course the High Priest had taken in pursuit of Kamijou and Mikoto.

Something had triggered a collapse in the areas from which the mummy had chaotically pulled the dirt.

“Ah…ahhh…ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!?”

The city was being destroyed.

“Didn’t I tell you? It is only an issue of sooner or later.”

The High Priest really did sound exasperated.

“You simply did not notice, so you needlessly spread the damage. Now, how many people do you think will be buried in the rubble?”

The destruction swallowing up the earth was approaching.

It was like a bizarre fuse.

“You were seriously mistaken if you thought you had any say in how much damage was done.”

The mummy mocked the boy’s ignorance.

“Just to be clear, *I was the one that destroyed all of this*.”

Then the fuse of destruction reached the High Priest’s feet.

The result was clear as day.

“And you were far too shallow if you assumed I would not allow myself to be caught in it all. Well, perhaps that is just the carefree way the Japanese think.”

The sturdy asphalt crumbled all at once.

A square area twenty meters across collapsed and the sense of gravity vanished. The puny boy could only clench his right fist as he was easily swallowed up.

Part 2

Widespread destruction filled Academy City from District 7, through District 5 and 18, and finally to District 23.

Kamijou Touma stood at the final point and he too fell deep underground as the ground collapsed underneath him.

But the space did not look like it had been created just from the ground splitting open.

An underground facility had existed there in the first place. It was twenty meters across and more than three hundred meters deep. At that size, its height alone made it a deadly weapon.

In fact, when the High Priest fell to the bottom of the cylindrical space, dry sounds came from across his body. It sounded more like the breaking of dry branches than of a human body. His purple robe spread out like a beached jellyfish, but it wrapped around his human form once more as if nothing had happened.

As for Kamijou Touma…

“Ho ho.”

The High Priest laughed.

Countless thick power cables were wrapped around the pointy-haired boy’s arms, legs, and torso. They had distributed his weight and prevented him from dying in the fall.

Of course, the mummy did not think for a second that was a coincidence.

He knew Kamijou Touma.

He doubted someone fundamentally abandoned by luck would experience such great fortune now of all times. Also, the boy himself would never work from a plan that relied on coincidences or miracles. He would have been acting based on the assumption that nothing like that would happen.

So…

“That did not happen naturally. I don’t see that girl who was with you… Did you get her help? In that case, were you planning to fall down here from the beginning?”

What did that matter?

What would it accomplish?

With a dull sound, dirt overflowed from the bottom of the manmade space and it swallowed up the wreckage around the High Priest like a living creature. It was primarily made of dirt, but countless manmade materials jutted out, twisted around, and formed a giant arm.

It was as menacing as being stared down by a plesiosaur.

“If you have a trick up your sleeve, then reveal it. If you have a trap, then use it. …But I will crush it all underfoot and continue forward.

It is only an issue of sooner or later. Hurry up and feel despair, okay?”

“…”

In response, Kamijou removed the countless cables from himself and set his feet down on the metal floor.

“*There wasn’t any damage.*”

“…What?”

With the liquid diamond’s storage tube in her sports bag, Akikawa Mie finally reached the headquarters of the precious metals maker at which her mother worked.

But that was not the end of it all.

“Mie-chan!!”

“Mom?”

Mie was confused. Had her mother been so worried she came out to meet her? But that did not make sense. She had not called ahead, so her mother would not have known exactly when she would arrive.

Then why else would she have come out?

Mie looked around and saw lots of other workers rushing from the other buildings in the area.

“Conservation of mass? I knew that. You left a big empty spot underground when you made the giant arms? I knew that. You were setting up a cruel bomb to make me suffer? I knew that. So! I was worried about it from the beginning!!”

As he spoke, Kamijou pulled out a cellphone.

It was a far too common and powerless modern weapon when compared to an abnormal Magic God.

“There’s a danger of the buildings collapsing!! Please move as far toward the park as possible to escape the collapse and the shower of broken glass!! …Uiharu! Double check the population distribution. Arrange the routes so there won’t be any bottlenecks at bridges and intersections!”

“I already am! Let’s see, let’s see. Manually reselecting the traffic control centers and traffic light routines. This should optimize the flow of people!”

A twintailed girl was shouting something. She seemed to be from Judgment rather than Anti-Skill.

Akikawa Mie’s mother wrapped her arms around her.

“It’s okay, Mie-chan. It’s going to be okay.”

“What is…?”

She trailed off as an intense tremor ran through the ground.

“Who did you contact? Who would believe you if you mentioned a Magic God? And what acquaintance of yours could get so many people to move?”

“It may be true no one in my class would be able to do that.”

Kamijou readily admitted it.

The asphalt ground swelled up in a straight line. It looked like a giant snake or worm measuring dozens or even hundreds of meters long was crawling underneath. It may have been best to leave the realm of real animals and call it a dragon.

Buildings creaked and swayed ominously.

They were as unreliable as willow branches in the wind and it seemed they would break and collapse at any moment.

Misaka Worst in her ao dai and Kuroyoru Umidori spoke to each other inside the underground disaster prevention structure.

“This isn’t good. Are these dampers really working properly? Misaka gets the feeling they can’t absorb all this shaking. Now, let’s see. Can Misaka slip in some assistance here?”

“Oh? I never thought I’d see a collection of malice helping people.”

“Misaka recently realized that there’s nothing more expensive than what’s given for free! There are luxury boutiques and jewelry shops around here, right? If Misaka gets them indebted to her, she can make all sorts of useful connections! How strange! This is the first time Misaka has gone shopping in a long time and a chance to make a whole bunch of money lands right in her lap!!”

“You really are rotten to the core! And in a completely different way from those of us implanted with the Dark May Project!!”

“But that high-class #3 is a different story. She apparently has connections in Judgment, so she can get the city moving pretty easily. Connections sure are amazing. Getting the word out quickly can be a weapon. I’d never be able to do that so easily.”

“…”

But it did not happen.

The city did not collapse.

"…?"

Akikawa Mie hesitantly looked straight up, but the building still did not fall. Not even a single window broke. Something awful was happening underground, but the damage had not reached the surface.

"See? I told you."

She realized her mother was winking.

"I told you everything would be okay. That man is protecting the city, so it's sure to be okay."

Kamijou explained a tiny flow. He explained a certain rule.

"You thought Academy City's law enforcement wouldn't understand the threat of an occult Magic God, didn't you? But that's easy to get around. Academy City is still on edge after the incident with Othinus that spread from Tokyo Bay to Denmark."

Only a few meters below, a middle-aged man with glasses and a comb-over removed his suit jacket, threw it aside, and gave instructions over his cellphone.

"Pour in all of the liquid material sitting in the warehouse!! The damage has spread farther than we could have imagined! It looks like someone built a network of tunnels while ignoring every last safety regulation! If the foundation is pulled out, the city above will collapse!!"

The person on the other end of the phone was confused by these instructions that ignored the proper procedures, but the man placed his middle finger on the bridge of his glasses. The person on the phone could not see it, but it may have been a sort of ritual.

"*Shut up and just do as you're told, you utter buffoon!! Once this is all over and everyone's safe and sound, you can banish me over by the window or onto a remote island if you want!!*"

An Anti-Skill woman came over to check on things.

"Sorry about asking a civilian for help. So does it look like you can pull this off?"

That father's answer was simple.

"I think I can. No, I will. That is my job, after all."

His daughter had once wondered why he had bowed when there was no reason to apologize. She had seen the shine leaving his face and she had even wondered why her mother had married him. She had wanted to know how her father had ended up like that.

There was of course only one answer.

He had found something more important than his own interests or allowing himself to shine.

And he would bet everything he could to protect it.

"They may not have been consciously aware of it, but there was still a scab there. The issues had been resolved and everyone was being swept into the Christmas spirit, but then St. Germain showed up. He tore off that scab when everyone was the most sensitive. That's bound to leave everyone in a frenzy."

Nothing happened.

They were saved.

Akikawa Mie’s goal had not collapsed. The large building had not fallen over. If she could take the liquid diamond inside, no robbers could get their hands on it so easily.

But just as she was thinking that, someone else began to move.

“Found you.”

“The anti-crime orientation is normally meant to help people feel more safe by buying up disaster goods they don’t know if they’ll ever use, but it was probably also a way for us to let off some steam. And then you caused this giant commotion. For better or for worse, people are going to react. That’s going to cause a mess that the ‘main players’ like us can never predict.”

In the large crowd, Akikawa Mie was not immediately able to tell who had spoken.

But once she did, her mind focused in on him like a piece of trick art.

A battered college boy was mixed in with the office workers in suits. She had only ever seen one in movies or dramas, but he aimed a handgun at her.

Her mother had not noticed yet.

She frantically pushed her mother out of the way, but that was the most she could manage.

“I don’t need to explain the details. I just have to know that everyone is on the move right now! The people here aren’t good or bad, they’re just people who have desperately thought this through!! And that will create a path!!”

The High Priest had mocked both Othinus the defector and St. Germain the liar as being below him, but their actions had helped scoop the High Priest's feet out from under him. That was how Kamijou and Mikoto had set this up.

"Hand it over! Hand over that liquid diamoooooooonnnnddddd!!"

He shouted and placed his finger on the trigger without warning.

He seemed to think it made no different whether he killed her and then took it or took it and then killed her.

Akikawa Mie squeezed her eyes shut, but the gunshot never came.

Instead, she heard a heavy metallic sound.

At some point, another college boy had circled behind him and swung down a metal pipe.

"So Judgment will be on the move right about now. Once word reaches the adults, Anti-Skill will join them. Everyone will have been evacuated from the buildings in the danger zones. No, all of those people are fighting to reach tomorrow. They really are! No matter how many buildings you bring down, you won't take any lives! People's lives aren't that fragile!! They may look twisted and they may be divided between good and evil, but everyone's working to be what they consider the best!! Even if some of them come into conflict, they'll still decide on the general direction of the era even if they have to do it without us!!"

At first, the attack from behind did not stop the college student with the gun.

He tried to turn around with rage coloring his face.

It was another hand reaching in from the side that truly settled things.

“Whose gun…”

This new figure wore an Anti-Skill combat uniform.

And there was one more.

“Whose daughter…”

The two adults both grabbed the thug’s collar.

“…do you think that is!?”

“…do you think that is!?”

Their fists flew at once and two dull sounds exploded out.

As Shiosai handcuffed the one, the other college student threw aside his metal pipe. He did not run or hide; he raised his hands and faced the Anti-Skill man who did not know the details yet.

The father with glasses and a comb-over raised his middle finger toward the collapsed thug. Finally able to relax, Akikawa Mie hugged him and let him support her, but she still had a question in one corner of her mind.

“Why?” she asked the final individual.

She knew it was a silly question.

That final remaining college student, Higata, gave a smiling expression of some hard-to-grasp emotion.

“This is for the best,” he said. “If he would have become a murderer otherwise, then this is for the best. We’re friends after all.”

No one noticed, but two people sighed from surprisingly close by.

They were Hanzou and Kuruwa. They had happened to be nearby and they returned their hidden weapons to their sleeves while slipping back into the crowd.

“We had our job taken from us.”

“It’s best if we don’t have anything to do.”

The one boy did not know every piece of the tragedy.

Nor was it all resolved by the strength of a single individual.

People wishing to take on that role could be found anywhere.

“That speeds things up.”

The mummy High Priest’s murderous aura grew.

The old man smiled while overflowing with a sticky joy.

“Let us continue our one-sided game. This is only an issue of sooner or later, so-…”

“Sorry, but that’s over, too.”

Kamijou readily cut him off.

How many people had ever been able to speak so confidently to one known as a Magic God?

“You’ve done too much, so I’m going to tell you something no one’s been able to before. It’s time you got what’s coming to you, High Priest!!”

The giant arm seemed to block out the sun from high in the sky and it clenched into a far-too powerful fist.

But…

“…?”

The High Priest looked up in confusion and observed the fist he himself had made.

Kamijou knew why.

A deafening sound had come from it, but that far exceeded what the High Priest had been expecting.

“You make your arms from dirt and mud, but that excludes anything processed, be it by heat treatment or a chemical reaction. After all, you grabbed the buildings to swing them around. If you could directly control what had been transformed into glass and concrete, the high-rise buildings could have bent and attacked us like something from a cartoon.”

Kamijou paused for a second.

“But you can’t tell if something else has been mixed into your arms. Misaka proved that by mixing the iron sand in to take control.”

“But this is different. This isn’t like the iron sand.”

“Yes, because trying the exact same thing again would have been too risky. We went for something a little trickier here. Then again, all we did was leave a bunch of compressed gas cylinders lying around where you were likely to create your arm. And thanks to District 23’s focus on aerospace, you can find plenty of liquid oxygen and hydrogen.”

And of course, Kamijou was not trying to detonate the gas cylinders to trap the High Priest in the explosion.

He did not think a gas explosion was enough to defeat this opponent.

The explosion was only the trigger leading to a different phenomenon.

So what was the gas explosion used for?

“Did you know this? The earth’s mantle ranges from 500 to 4000 degrees and the core can reach 6000 degrees. No one ever set them on fire. They just reached those amazing temperatures when the matter was squeezed down by the immense pressure.”

“You don’t mean…”

“Of course, this is all based on what a smart girl told me. …So what if highly-pressurized cylinders are arranged according to a certain pattern to create that core of explosive pressure? What if that great pressure is even partially recreated by artificial means? What do you think would happen to that giant dirt arm you love so much!?”

“Kah kah!! You can’t possibly mean what I think you do!!”

It happened as the High Priest looked up at it.

Just as it seemed the giant fist was collapsing from within, a glowing orange waterfall rushed down toward the mummy.

Part 3

In truth, even if their calculations had reproduced the intense pressure, only a single point would have reached a high enough temperature to become magma, but that magma melted the dirt and mud around it, creating even more magma. That massive deadly weapon could be seen forming and then dripping down.

The High Priest could control dirt and mud, but not if it had undergone heat treatment or a chemical reaction like glass or concrete.

And that meant there was nothing he could do once the giant arm turned to magma.

In the instant it hit, Kamijou Touma leaped backwards with all his strength, got down on the ground, and placed a hand over his mouth.

The tower-sized arm crumbled from the intense heat and rushed toward the High Priest who stood directly below. The glow of the molten rock quickly enveloped the mummy’s dried branch-like body and erased all sign of him. That syrupy mineral of death spread out from its landing point.

It had worked.

Everything had gone according to plan.

They had made no mistakes and the result they had imagined was right in front of him.

“Did…we do it?” he muttered without thinking.

The pile of melted magma looked like ice cream dropped on the scorching asphalt on a midsummer day, so it could not exactly answer him.

The boy looked around and then looked straight up.

“Misa-…”

“*Did you do it? Do what exactly?*”

His hope, relief, optimism, pride, and everything else froze over.

Kamijou’s head turned stiffly like an automaton someone had forgotten to oil. He looked back toward the pile of molten rock where everything should have been over. He even asked himself what there was left to check there.

Then he saw what awaited him there.

“Kamijou Touma, I believe I already told you this only an issue of sooner or later.”

It was despair.

Pure despair.

The glowing orange pile of magma split apart and the mummy slowly appeared. His purple robe and golden sword had burned or melted away and his entire body glowed ominously after being covered by magma that easily exceeded one thousand degrees. It looked less like a human body and more like an alien that had stepped out of a strange UFO.

Kamijou found it very difficult to accept this had once been a human like him.

Given the temperature of the High Priest's body, he could kill someone just by hugging them.

No, anyone who breathed in near him would fry their lungs.

Kamijou was dumbfounded, but the glowing pile of branches tilted his head in confusion.

Why was his opponent always so surprised?

He truly did not seem to understand.

"Now, what did you imagine a Magic God was? I am a mummy and all of my body's muscles, fat, and organs have withered away! Did you really think any kind of external wound or asphyxiation could take my life!?"

"…!?"

"I was prepared to throw away even my own life and soul to accomplish my goal. How could I be a Magic God without that level of resolve? You would probably be in for quite a shock if you looked into the origins of Othinus who you keep by your side."

The orange High Priest laughed.

His mouth split open and he spewed toxic-looking black smoke.

(This is what Nephthys was talking about.)

Kamijou gulped and felt unpleasant sweat covering his body.

(The High Priest's power doesn't stop at destruction. She said he has free control of 'the intersection of the Six Paths'.)

Humans, animals, and devas. It sounded like something from an old story. When people died, they were reborn and might live the next life as some other life form. Kamijou did not know how exactly that explained the current situation. In fact, while the mental strength of mankind was one thing, could anyone – even the occult specialists known as magicians – explain what the soul was? A lot of the magicians he had seen were angrily swearing revenge for someone who had died. Didn't that meant the magicians had not conquered death and could not sufficiently define or handle the soul?

But what if the High Priest truly was wielding the Six Paths?

The soul was something no one had seen before, but what if he could change its value and rank by switching between the different rails?

(Is it a spell to change something's precedence like with Terra of the Left? Was it not superhuman strength that let him destroy or swing around those buildings? Did he weaken what was to be destroyed or used?)

Kamijou felt like he was a step away, but he could not quite grasp it.

For one thing, would a Magic God like the High Priest really use the same sort of power as Terra who had remained in the category of human?

But that thought process was the same as giving up on thinking.

It was easy to conclude that a human mind could not understand a Magic God, but that would mean Kamijou had no chance of winning. He would essentially be moving the chess pieces without giving it any thought.

He understood that.

He understood it painfully well, but he still just about threw it all aside.

That was how overwhelming his despair was.

“If you accept defeat after merely being killed, you will never leave the category of magician. Those are the rules of the lower world and they do not apply to Magic Gods like us.”

It was on an entirely different level.

It was just too different.

It felt like running the 100-meter dash at full speed and gasping for breath while crossing the goal only to find that a 42.195 kilometer full marathon awaited you.

Where was the goal?

How far did he have to go to end this battle?

“Kamijou Touma.”

The High Priest tried to rest on his staff, realized there was nothing there, and idly remembered that the golden sword had melted from the heat.

“Do you mind if I ask one – just one – pointless question?”

“What…might that be?”

“There is no need to be so defensive. It is a simple matter.”

The orange and boiling High Priest patted his own shoulders and continued speaking as if nothing had happened.

He said just one thing.

“It feels like everything you are doing here is so uninteresting.”

He sounded bored.

Or perhaps disappointed was the better description.

“It isn’t like you. It isn’t like you at all. Kamijou Touma, did all of this logical fighting come from that girl’s knowledge? Are you being dragged along by her way of thinking? If so, I can understand why this has been so uninteresting.”

“…”

“Ho ho. I thought so!! For one, why didn’t you use Imagine Breaker right away? Normally, when faced with an impossible phenomenon that ignore the laws of physics, the sensible thing to do would be to at least try using your right hand’s power!! Even if that merely proved it did not work, knowing you couldn’t use it would still be a step forward!!”

Kamijou did not know what the High Priest was getting at, but the mummy continued on regardless.

“You ran away as soon as you saw me? Boring. You fled all throughout Academy City? Oh, how boring. Just when it seems I’ve caught up, you use compressed gas cylinders to create magma? Oh! How! Boring!! All of this has been a complete waste of time!! Think how I have to feel going along with it all! I’ve been waiting this whole time for you to use Imagine Breaker against me just once!! To be honest, the one thing that was most *like you* was the courageous dive from the rooftop at the very beginning! Everything has been so boring ever since that girl showed up!! You’ve shrunk down and curled up! You’ve only been using petty tricks to reduce the amount of damage!!!!!”

“What…are you saying?”

That was all he could say back.

He did not know what the mummy meant.

“There’s never anything ‘interesting’ about fighting. Don’t decide on your own what’s ‘like me’ or not!! If I can keep things peaceful, that’s obviously for the best! If I can keep anything from happening, what could be better!? Why do I have to purposefully turn in the direction I know to be more dangerous!?”

“Is that only because you feel that girl is still nearby?”

It did not get through to the High Priest.

No normal reasoning would reach him.

“Kamijou Touma, you are neither omniscient nor omnipotent. All you have is great talent in one extremely specialized area, yet you have risen to a place so very close to guiding the world. Everyone knows what the right thing to do is, but that does not mean they have the courage to act on it. It is the decisiveness to grasp that opportunity despite the great risk that has brought you so high.”

Someone else was explaining a side of himself he was unaware of.

The situation was almost laughable.

“And yet you have grown so focused on protecting something, that you are abandoning that talent of yours. You’ve grown weak, pathetic, exhausted, and a shadow of your former self. Did you mistake that for growth? What has happened to you would better be described as growing decrepit.”

The High Priest paused for a moment in preparation for his decisive statement.

“You are letting that boring girl drag you around and it is just sad. You are not so small a ‘human’ that you should be contained here.”

Part 4

“!”

Kamijou Touma was not the only one listening to the High Priest.

Misaka Mikoto was as well.

A narrow catwalk was positioned by the wall about twenty meters up in the giant cylindrical space. Tokiwadai Middle School’s Ace hid herself with a hand on the wall that said “Watch out for secondary electromagnetic waves while using precision medical equipment.” Her face twisted like she had been stabbed.

If she had been unwisely standing next to that boy, she would likely have worked to control her expression.

But that proved impossible when she was on her own.

After all, the words of that bizarre mummy seemed to tear into her heart.

“If that girl is keeping you from using your right hand, that is a distinct negative.”

There was no ill will there.

It was no different from seeing a plastic bag on the side of the road and wanting to remove it.

“If that girl is keeping you from saying you will destroy my illusions, then she is already tripping you up.”

That was exactly why it stabbed into her.

She had held pride in her position as Tokiwadai Middle School’s Ace, but that meant nothing against this opponent. That was why the sound waves he had not meant to reach her tore into her heart all the more.

"I simply cannot understand it myself, but is it that hard to push someone aside? I would think it is plain as day that girl is nothing but a burden to you. I can't think of any reason to have kept her with you all this time."

The title of Academy City's #3 was meaningless now.

She had no idea how much the category of Level 5 meant in the wider world outside of this city.

"I can understand fleeing the school with her and I can understand keeping her with you until I lost sight of you. But why after that? If you had thrown her out and had her slip into the crowds, you would have been freed from that annoyance, so why did you keep her with you?"

A certain doubt had occurred to her quite a while ago.

Was that boy walking through some distant world? He was not special himself, but was the world surrounding him on a stage or two above her, was he surrounded by people who knew him better than her, and had she fallen behind to the point that she could only see an afterimage of him?

"Take that grimoire library for example. The knowledge of those 103,000 grimoires might have been helpful. And Othinus might have been able to give you some accurate advice from the viewpoint of a Magic God. Then you would have been able to clench your right fist and challenge me to a battle focused on Imagine Breaker. That would be the proper way of doing this, but it all fell apart thanks to that girl. What do you think about this situation?"

She had stretched out her hand, but she had not reached him.

She had thought she only needed to reach out a little more, but that was because she had not wanted to admit she had fallen so far behind.

Wasn't that all it was?

"Kamijou Touma."

The girl thought.

Had she really been of any help to that boy?

Had she really done anything that only she could have done?

"Say it now. Tell her to get behind you. Tell her to curl up in the corner and stay put because she is getting in your way."

That attack made her gasp and her mind nearly went dark.

But she still could not find any way of denying it.

After all, even she could tell.

Kamijou Touma's actions this entire time had not been like him.

Immediately running from a powerful enemy? Not like him. Facing an opponent with clearly superhuman abilities yet not using the mysterious power that had defeated Academy City's #1 Level 5? Not like him. Making his final trump card to defeat that powerful enemy a strategy anyone could trigger that was based on normal physics that a girl had told him about? Not like him.

Not like him, not like him, not like him.

He would always act recklessly, ignore efficiency and logic, and simply reach out to grab victory. Watching him had always been so thrilling, but nothing here seemed like it came from that same boy.

In that case, what was forcing him in this other direction?

What was making him suppress himself?

When he had made jokes as the High Priest pursued them and when he had seemed so stricken by Nephthys and Niang-Niang on the work ship, she had thought he lacked any tension.

But what if those things had meaning, too?

She could not say this applied to it all, but what if a portion of it had been an act on his part?

What if he had done it to ensure the fear and pressure did not crush Misaka Mikoto's heart?

And what if that had placed an even larger burden on that boy himself?

The flow of events from Tokyo Bay to Denmark had seemed a mystery to her, but what if that was the same?

It had not been about Kamijou. It had been about Othinus.

He had simply gone along with her, just like with Mikoto now.

He had been determined to protect the girl standing alongside him.

That was beautiful.

But at the same time, it presented Mikoto with an awfully cruel answer.

(Oh…)

She felt like all strength was leaving her body.

Her life was being directly threatened here, but she nearly forgot even that.

(I'm only…to him.)

She gritted her teeth.

Her mind tried to seal that word away to make this even a little easier for her, but she forced it to the surface.

(I'm only *a burden* to him!!)

This situation strained her very identity.

Still, she had to accept it.

What if she had not been here?

Or what if someone else had been here instead?

The boy named Kamijou Touma probably would have walked an entirely different path. He could have relaxed, let them support him, spread his wings wide, used his strong points to their fullest, and clashed with the High Priest head-on.

That might have been an incredibly dangerous path, but it might also have had the highest odds of victory.

But that path had been sealed.

Thanks to Misaka Mikoto's presence, the boy who had stopped World War Three and the international terrorist group(?) named Gremlin had been dragged down to a position anyone could fill.

She had accomplished nothing.

It had seemed that boy had moved far ahead of her and that she had not wanted to accept she had fallen behind, but her desperate attempts to catch up had only hindered him and held him back.

Everything she had done had backfired.

She had only been a nuisance.

Misaka Mikoto could only hang her head.

"…oking?"

But then she heard that boy's voice.

"Are you joking, High Priest? You're a complete stranger, so quit acting like you know who I am!!"

The basis of it all crumbled away after that one strike.

That was what his words had done.

“I could have chosen a different path if I was with Index? I could have taken the best possible path if I was with Othinus? That’s not what this is about.”

How much courage had it taken to speak those words?

That abnormal monster stood there nonchalantly even while surrounded by magma easily exceeding one thousand degrees. It was impossible to tell whether that mummy was alive or not. How could they defeat him and end this? Was it even possible to end it? Not even that was clear with him, so how difficult had it been to speak those simple words?

But that boy had done it.

He spoke like it was normal.

“It was because Misaka was with me that I made it this far. She kept my trembling legs moving, supported my heart as the pressure bore down on it, and kept me in a position to make jokes. With Index, things may have been too focused on magic. With Othinus, it would have been exclusively about Magic Gods and having a clear understanding of their strength might have crushed me with despair. It was *because* it was Misaka. I survived this long because she was the one by my side. She saved my life and you want me to tell her to back off because she’s in the way? *Who the hell do you think you are!? You don’t understand the first thing about the human emotion of this human world, but you’re trying to act like some all-knowing god*!!!!!!”

“Heh heh. Argue from a position of emotion or willpower all you want. It does not change the fact that she was, in fact, a burden. What does that girl understand of magic? Not to mention of the territory known as a Magic God. What use is someone who has fallen so hopelessly behind? Enough pretending, Kamijou Touma. You were honestly growing sick of having to lower the conversation to her level, weren’t you?”

"You're thinking about this entirely wrong."

Kamijou Touma did not hold back even when his opponent was truly on an entirely different level.

No.

No.

"It isn't a question of being useful or not!"

Misaka Mikoto realized a dizzying truth.

It was not that he was on a different level.

At this very moment, Kamijou Touma was rising to another stage and leaving her behind in a way other than the one the High Priest had mentioned.

"Hey, High Priest. I'm not enough of a crazed hero to throw my life away if I'm not supporting something in need of protection! You senile old man!!"

Part of that saved her.

But another part of it she could not accept.

"Take it back."

Kamijou Touma was admitting that Misaka Mikoto had fallen behind. He was admitting that, yet announcing he would still patiently stick with her. Ultimately, she could not stand on the same stage as him and she had not approached the truth of this "Magic God". In his mind, she was "something in need of protection". She was intensely dissatisfied with that.

"So take it back, you piece of shit Magic God!! If you badmouth the person who saved my life any more, I'll go punch you just like you want!!"

But what did that matter?

Was that any reason to stop?

"I don't care if you're covered in magma or if you're over one thousand degrees! Imagine Breaker? I don't need that for you and I don't care if it doesn't work on you! I don't care if my fist melts away or if my entire body bursts into flames. Yeah, if you don't shut that filthy mouth of yours right this instant, I'll keep punching you until you finally do!!!!!!"

The boy was ignoring their original plan and putting his own life in danger. His every word stabbed into Mikoto's chest and filled her with countless emotions.

If she had fallen behind, then she had to gather her strength and move forward more than anyone else. The greater her debt, the more she had to build up speed and catch up as soon as possible. Wasn't that all this was?

"I see," said the High Priest.

Most importantly, hadn't she made up her mind from the very beginning?

It went back to Sargasso in Tokyo Bay and the trip to Denmark where he made an enemy of the world.

"Was it emotion that led you to the peace of mind we so yearned for?"

"Grit your teeth, High Priest. This might ruin my right hand and I might really have to get it amputated at the hospital, but I'll trade that arm for your face!! Prepare yourself because I'm going to keep beating you until you realize the error of your ways!!"

She had decided she would ask Kamijou Touma what had happened to him at that time and that place. She had been prepared to accept it no matter how inconvenient a truth was hidden there.

Hadn't that been her way of catching back up?

(I'll do it.)

In that case, this was no time to be sitting around worrying.

(I swear I'll do it.)

If she had any complaints and if she had things she wanted to correct…

(I'll catch up to him!!)

She had to start by telling him!!

Part 5

Even with Imagine Breaker, it seemed unlikely he could negate the Magic God portion of the High Priest. Even after all the contact he had with Othinus, she had never died.

Even if he desperately punched the mass of molten rock, it seemed unlikely that strike would break the High Priest. He only had the physical strength of a high school boy. He doubted it would do any damage to the High Priest who had endured the previous fierce attacks as casually as having a chat over tea.

That was why the resolution relied on something else.

"Why are you letting the blood rush to your head, you idiot!!"

Just as Kamijou Touma clenched his fist as hard as rock and prepared to take the first step toward the orange and burning High Priest, he heard a shout.

"Isn't there something better you can do than let that magma man set you ablaze!?"

There was something else that felt much closer by than his mysterious right hand.

The look in his eyes changed when he heard the girl.

"…Tch."

Meanwhile, the crimson mummy known as the High Priest clearly clicked his tongue.

He seemed to be giving up on something.

He seemed to be saying he would find someone else to be the scorer who influenced the world, created the seventh path, and became the sheath for the Magic Gods' power.

He did not hesitate to drag his 1000+ degree body toward Kamijou.

But the boy was not bound in place and he was not set alight.

"Oooooaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!"

Misaka Mikoto gave a yell from directly above and a cascade of rubble poured down.

The burning mummy was briefly swallowed up by the rubble.

The orange glow vanished.

"We aren't in this to defeat him. We're trying to safely reach the end of this day! We decided that before falling down here, remember!?"

When he heard that, Kamijou shifted to a different train of thought.

He shifted from destruction to survival.

He grabbed the handlebars of the acrobike that had fallen with him, he pedaled it from the side without sitting in the saddle, and he let it drag him away.

(That's right. There's no real reason I have to settle this. There's no rule saying magicians or Magic Gods can't be defeated if I don't use my right hand to negate their magic.)

Strength filled his thoughts as he just barely managed to avoid being swallowed up.

(You called Misaka's power worthless, High Priest, so it's time that very power sent you tumbling down into defeat!!)

This may have been meaningless against an opponent who would not stop if he was only killed. It might only delay the inevitable by a dozen or so seconds and that mummy might crawl out unharmed.

But buying that time was more than enough.

"Misaka, are you ready!?"

"If I wasn't, I'd be panicking a lot more right now!! So hurry!!"

The two of them clung to the acrobike and sent it flying.

But not toward the pile of rubble burying the High Priest.

They turned their backs and moved in the opposite direction. They made their way to a metal maintenance door *so they could escape the large cylindrical space.*

What was this space meant for in the first place?"

"...oring..."

Resentment filling his voice, the High Priest thrust his dried hand from the top of the rubble.

The rubble around him glowed orange and melted into a syrupy substance as a surprisingly sticky sound signaled his regained freedom. The surrounding oxygen was absorbed and his temporarily extinguished body burst into flames once more.

A Magic God was not going to complain about the pain that would normally have caused.

“Boring, boring, boring, boring!!!!!! At last, at long last, *it looked like the winds were changing*, but that girl!! Are you going to run away after all this? How many times have I told you it is only a matter of sooner or later? How long are you going to delay the inevitable!? What happened to Imagine Breaker!? What happened to your right hand!? What happened to the One who Purifies Gods and Slays Demooooooooooooooooonnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnsssssssssssssssssss ssssssss!?”

Kamijou and Mikoto ignored what he had to say, slipped through the metal door, and vanished.

The High Priest’s skinny body swelled out with immense strength as if to break through that thick door.

But that was when it happened.

“…?”

Something like static electricity scattered.

A stinging chemical smell reached him.

Anyone with the proper knowledge may have realized it was a catalyst like neon or argon that would produce a plasma flow when immense amounts of electricity were passed through it in an enclosed space.

The walls of the large cylinder began to glow with a bluish-white light. The smaller pieces of rubble began to ignore gravity and float.

That strange power gradually grew stronger and finally even the High Priest’s body was floating.

Yes.

With the melted rubble, dirt, mud, and metal surrounding his body, he could easily fill the role of a metal shell.

“O-ohhhhh!? C-could this be…!!!???”

Part 6

Parasatellite 01 was an unmanned astronomical probe developed for the Arrowhead Comet as it made its closest approach to Earth in 1700 years.

It was to be fired from an underground silo-style mass driver in Academy City’s District 23.

It could be fired for only the cost of the electricity needed to power the low-temperature superconductor electrodes and the space-filling plasma flow. It was single-stage, so it did not require any complex trajectory management.

Less than ten minutes after being fired, it would leave the atmosphere and place its payload in the desired orbit.

Part 7

The immense plasma flow was given directionality and everything inside the cylindrical space was fired.

It all broke through the clouds and scattered out from the center. A single line of light burnt through the heavens as it left the planet.

Part 8

The explosion blew away their sense of hearing.

The thick metal door was closed, yet the two of them still abandoned the acrobike and threw themselves onto the floor. It was just like a stun grenade. Even if no actual damage was done, the light and sound were intense enough to give the illusion of damage. Also, humans could die from shock just from having soft serve ice cream pressed to their chest while they were blindfolded.

The gyros continued functioning, so the acrobike remained standing all on its own.

"…Ah…!! Khah!! Ahh!!!???"

"Kh…gh… A-are you okay?"

Kamijou's mouth continued flapping like a goldfish's, so Mikoto recovered first. That may have been because she was accustomed to using abnormally high voltage currents.

"Wh-where's the High Priest?"

"We used a real mass driver. He'll have been launched beyond the moon."

However, they apparently could not open the door right away and check. They would supposedly lose an arm or a leg if they set foot inside before the excess electricity was removed from the inside of the "barrel".

The two of them made their way outside.

The acrobike proved useful again. They were at the bottom of a three hundred meter pit, so it was anyone's guess how long it would have taken them to climb the stairs on foot. The suspension absorbed most of the shock from the steps, so it only felt like a slightly bumpy slope.

"Thanks, Misaka."

"…For what?"

"Without you, I never would have imagined I could use a mass driver. Even if the idea came to me, it would have ended as a fantasy I couldn't hope to pull it off in reality. I wouldn't have any idea what switches to use or anything like that. The High Priest controls the dirt, so there's nothing he can do once he's removed from the planet. …The scope of this whole thing has gotten so crazy."

If that comment had been ironic or sarcastic, she would have punched him.

If he had laughed and praised her for at least taking part or making an effort, she would have thrown him down the stairs.

“But I didn’t do anything.”

“You’re saying that after everything you did?”

“But I really didn’t.”

Mikoto pouted her lips without thinking and belatedly realized how childish it was.

But she could not stop herself. Not in front of this boy.

“I didn’t do anything. I’m not saying that on the level of using my power to throw rubble around or to hijack the mass driver’s firing sequence. *This entire incident was between you and that monster called the High Priest*. There was never a place for me here.”

“Are you sure?” His response came immediately. “It honestly doesn’t matter to me who the hero is. As long as everything’s been resolved, I couldn’t ask for anything more. So… So Misaka, this didn’t need a hero. It ended without losing anyone and that’s all that matters.”

“(Sigh. He wouldn’t be so hard to deal with if he wasn’t honestly thanking me from the bottom of his heart.)”

“Hm? Did you say something, Misaka?”

“No, nothing. I’m not so unprincipled that I would use a cobra twist on you when you’re so exhausted, so I’ll have to give you a rain check.”

“???”

At any rate, they had somehow dealt with the High Priest. Nephthys and Niang-Niang remained in Academy City and there could be several other Magic Gods hiding around, but this meant a lot. For the moment, they had ended the destruction spreading indiscriminately through the city.

With that in mind, Kamijou breathed a sigh of relief and drove out onto the surface with Mikoto.

They stepped down from the acrobike and placed their feet on the ground without worrying.

But then they noticed something was wrong.

“What?”

Kamijou was the first to ask about it.

“The sky’s…dark???”

Sure enough, it was still the afternoon, but the sky was as dark as evening. It was dark enough to make reading a book difficult. Also, the previously blue sky was covered in a thick gray fog. Even the sun was blurry and they could look at it without hurting their eyes. There were three rings of light surrounding it.

“A Bishop’s Ring,” muttered Mikoto as she lent him her shoulder. “Ten thousand tons of space dust pours down on the earth every day. It’s proven by the new layer measuring only a few millimeters that accumulates on the relatively unchanging ocean bottom every century. A Bishop’s Ring is a blurry ring of light that appears around the sun when an especially large amount of space dust is present.”

“What? Why would it be appearing now?”

“I don’t know. There’s more than one reason for a Bishop’s Ring to appear. For example, when a large portion of the debris storm circling the earth slams into the atmosphere, during a rocket or shuttle accident, or when a comet approaches and scatters a bunch of space dust-…”

Mikoto trailed off and her body tensed.

“When a comet approaches….”

Kamijou realized a moment later.

“Do you mean the Arrowhead Comet!?”

Part 9

There was no water or air there.

It was said outer space was filled with as-yet-unseen dark matter or small dust that would eventually form new astronomical bodies, but they were not dense enough to propagate sound or voices.

Nevertheless…

“Ho ho.”

He had been drenched in scorching molten rock that easily exceeded one thousand degrees, he had been exposed to the extremely high voltages of the plasma flow filling a mass driver, he had experienced the overwhelming air friction from an escape velocity of over Mach 20, and he had left the atmosphere with nothing to protect him.

The mummy’s entire body was wrapped in tremendous heat, but there was no oxygen for that heat to create fire. Melting the ice on the comet’s surface scattered quite a few chemical elements around, but it was still not the same as on the earth’s surface. That was why the High Priest only glowed brightly like a lightbulb’s filament.

“Uho hoi☆”

And his joking voice overturned those assumptions.

The lack of air kept him from bursting into flames, yet his voice freely propagated through that airless space.

He could control dirt.

The Magic God known as the High Priest sat in Zen meditation atop a one hundred meter mass of frozen rock shaped something like a rugby ball.

A Magic God could handle being thrown into space.

The Arrowhead Comet was mostly made of ice and dust. He had manipulated those particles like iron sand to take control of the comet. He had decided to use anything available to him to return, so he had hitched a ride back to Earth on that star.

Hadn't Nephthys said that the stars could be plucked from the sky so easily?

(Now, what will you do? What will you do when you see me approaching after you put so much into that attack, Kamijou Touma!? Can I trust that you will raise your naïve ideals against me!!!???)

The Arrowhead Comet left the supercomputer's predictions and clearly altered its trajectory.

It turned toward Earth.

He gave no thought to a proper approach angle. He did not care if the comet itself burst at extremely high altitude. The mummy himself could force his way through the thick atmosphere with no planning whatsoever.

As soon as he entered the atmosphere and was surrounded by oxygen, his incredible amount of heat would set him on fire. As soon as he crashed into District 23 at top speed, a giant dome shaped explosion would fill the entirety of Academy City. Still, that was just more entertainment.

He intended for this to reach beyond what Kamijou Touma's Imagine Breaker could handle.

But because of that…

“Ho hohhhhh!! It wells up inside you *because* it is impossible! It is only worth sending your way *because* it is an unreasonable demand! Kamijou Touma! Mankind!! This isn’t the extent of your possibilities, is it!? Now show me the hidden power that has allowed you to keep history running until this day!!!!!”

Still in his Zen pose, the High Priest spread his arms as if to welcome the blue planet with his entire body.

This was the exact opposite of comforting or calming.

The heat was so great that the mummy’s body had more melted than burned and it began to fuse with the one hundred meter comet. He controlled all the dust to indirectly command the hunk of ice. He himself became a sinister star.

The intense friction carved away at the comet’s surface.

At some point, it gained a giant face, arms, legs, and a torso, so it almost looked like a mummy.

The sinister glowing spear stabbed straight down toward the blue planet.

“Now come, Imagine Breaker!! No, the One who Purifies Gods and Slays Demons!! Show me your resolve by literally leaving everything up to your right haaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaannnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnnddddddddddddddddddddd!!”

Part 10

There was nothing they could do.

They could only watch as the orange light ignored its trajectory and dropped straight down.

Its speed may have been Mach 10, Mach 20, or even Mach 30.

Mikoto could only fire an arcade coin at three times the speed of sound, so this was beyond anything she could handle. She could only wait to be crushed and turned into a portion of a giant crater.

But…

"…"

Kamijou had been unsteady on his feet after the previous battle, but she felt him moving slightly while still resting on her shoulder. He silently reached up as if to grab the giant falling comet with his right hand.

She could not tell what meaning there was in that.

The boy himself probably could not explain what was hidden there.

"You…?"

She asked a pure question.

She was answered by an ominous cracking sound. It came from the body of the boy who was right next to her yet seemed impossibly far away.

—It honestly doesn't matter to me who the hero is.

After everything that had happened, it was only now that Mikoto truly felt fear.

—As long as everything's been resolved, I couldn't ask for anything more.

She felt fear rising from the pit of her stomach.

—So… So Misaka, this didn't need a hero.

All the while, she heard the intermittent sound of cracks running through something.

—It ended without losing anyone and that's all that matters.

Specifically, it came from the boy's right arm.

And…

And…

And…

Part 11

"Sensei," called a well-mannered voice.

It came from Kihara Yuiitsu, a woman in a cheap suit and a lab coat.

She was constantly mocking the entire world and the entire human race, but she was acting differently just this once. Just like a well-trained maid seeing her master off, she bowed at the proper angle, breathed at the proper times, and spoke in the proper tone.

"Have a good time."

"I will. Today should be a little rough, so stay here in this sturdy building."

A synthetic voice answered her.

It came from a golden retriever.

That dog was Kihara Noukan.

"Just to be clear, the situation is at D. That is four from the worst possible level. I assume you have already given thought to the local residents in case this happened."

"Yes, although I consider it a completely unnecessary concept for Kiharas like us."

"Yuiitsu-kun, this is not the time to be discussing that definition. I believe that was a personal promise between the two of us."

“Yes, it was! I scattered a few pieces of bait, but the *liquid diamond* seems to have been effective. The people involved are not aware, but they were gathered together like iron sand to a magnet. The population distribution and the dispersion patterns for the shockwave and shattering glass are all good to go. Just as your calculations proved, there will be no human damage even if you activate Situation D. Everything is within acceptable bounds☆”

“Very good. …Otherwise, we would be no different from the animals.”

The dog had no way of forming expressions, but he would have been smiling if he did.

Even without the expression, his scent and aura were enough to charm Kihara Yuiitsu.

“If anyone actually believes the cover story about the vault bending under its own weight because the building was flipped upside-down, they must be quite the pacifist.”

“Between good and bad, that would be a bad sort of stupidity, but between like and dislike, I would say I like it. A heart that can innocently believe others is a beautiful thing. I can sense the breath of romance in it.”

“Oh? *So you see that as romance, too?*”

He was surrounded by countless rocket boosters and he had a single weapon. It ran through the entire unit from front to back, but it was not the giant gun of a warship. It was overwhelmingly heavy and hard, it achieved blinding speeds using the same electromagnetic acceleration as railguns and mass drivers, and it ultimately produced its destructive power from a massive rotation. It was known as a tactical armor-piercing drill. The giant drill was dozens of meters long and it could break into an underground silo or directly destroy a military base.

"Heh," laughed the dog. "Men really can't get enough of drills and pile bunkers. We're perfectly willing to ignore profit when it comes to them."

"That sure is amazing. Although to an amateur like me, it only sounds like phallic compensation."

Oddly enough, the dog cleared his throat.

He seemed to be embarrassed.

"Anti-Art Attachment, set up."

With those words, the mass of metal came to life.

"Confirm connection to Aleister in District 7's center."

Kihara Yuiitsu knew she was in the danger zone, but she did not take even a single step back.

"Light boosters alpha through delta. Omit countdown. Takeoff."

It weighed more than twenty tons in all, but it seemed to forget all about gravity.

Only a few seconds later, the golden retriever bearing the entire unit became a spear to pierce the heavens.

Part 12

It truly happened in only an instant.

"Ho."

As the High Priest laughed amid the pressure of the intense wind, he saw a point on the surface flash.

By then, it was already over.

He had become a giant star of doom, but a long drill of tungsten steel pierced through the center of his body.

He was not even allowed to scream, cry out, or cough up blood.

Naturally, this was not contained to mere physical phenomena.

There was a systematic trembling that could be called an extremely high-speed high-frequency vibration. There was a slight unevenness in the drill's rotation, that pattern conveyed the power of someone's will, and it took the form of something that destroyed the High Priest's body from within. He had become one with the comet, but that strange something caused his flesh and bones to tremble and crumble.

Just as a second could be divided by a thousand or ten thousand, that instant seemed to last an eternity.

There was no time for a voice to propagate as a wave, but the golden retriever's will still reached the mummy.

"This is a message from the ghost named Aleister."

The weapon, the special steel drill, tore through the High Priest's giant form and its rotation produced and extremely high-speed and systematic fluctuation. Not only did it bring about the High Priest's death, but it created waveforms which were converted into words to convey someone's will directly to the High Priest's body rather than through the vibrations of his eardrums.

"Do you remember the life that was taken by destiny as if to smash the childish gears of a desire to make the world a better place and to save every last member of the human race? *Do you remember my daughter's name?*"

The mummy High Priest received that will and his body was still pierced down the center.

The heated surface of the comet split apart…in the shape of a slight smile.

Oddly, what he remembered was not the daughter's name, but the "ghost" who had created that situation.

That ghost had been a coldhearted pragmatist and yet went on the passionate rampages of a madman. Even as he cursed the imperfections of mankind, he had married a woman. Even as he rejected human emotion as impure, he had kept a journal. Even as an expert who had mastered magic, he had shown interest in the path of science. And even as he had determined he would need to fill so many boys and girls with chemicals, he had left a transparent tearstain in his journal on the day his own daughter had died. That "human" was the king of man who had rejected becoming a god of magic. He had seen meaning in that and had chosen to remain in the same realm as his family without giving up on anything.

The Magic God tried to speak a single word.

If the speed of sound had been just a little faster, he would have said that word: sorry.

A moment later, there was a flash of light.

Kihara Noukan refused to let the comet fall to the earth.

Acting in his role as messenger, the golden retriever had finished conveying the *willpower* of the "human" named Aleister.

The Arrowhead Comet had been racing toward the surface at greater than Mach 20, but the golden retriever had risen to meet it at the same speed. What result this had went without saying.

As had been shown at the Tunguska Event in Russia, when an astronomical body of a certain size broke apart in midair, it would cause an explosion large enough to spread a shockwave for dozens if not hundreds of kilometers.

All of the glass in Academy City shattered.

The high-rise buildings with excellent earthquake countermeasures creaked and swayed as they desperately worked to remain standing.

The commotion spread in a chain-reaction, but Kihara Noukan kept a perfectly cool head.

High in the sky, he adjusted the force of his boosters and slowed to a hover.

A skinny arm unrelated to the weaponry extended to place a cigar in his mouth and light it.

After that moment of bliss, a transmission arrived.

The golden retriever exhaled some sweet smoke as he opened his mouth to speak.

"One down. No, with Zombie, I suppose it's two."

"Well done."

He found it odd for Aleister the "human" to display such obvious emotion even if it was in response to defeating a Magic God.

But that was not it.

He heard something quite strange next.

"That takes care of Gremlin. You made quick work of them."

"Wait." Kihara Noukan double-checked something while grabbing the cigar with the arm. "I only took out the High Priest. I still have at least Nephthys and Niang-Niang to go."

"What are you talking about?" The emotion had vanished from Aleister's voice once more. "Then *you didn't do that?*"

"…"

The golden retriever honestly wondered what that meant.

He looked down on Academy City once more.

What was happening in that city?

Cycle Arts Collection 4

Hug

Difficulty: 2

Instead of sitting in the saddle, the performer clings to it from the side. That alone is simple, but there are a number of ways to hold on such as making a handstand on top of the handlebars. For that reason, the difficulty was increased by one point.

Stairs Shift

Difficulty: 1

Smoothly climbing stairs with the acrobike. At first glance, it looks like simply riding up the stairs while leaving everything to the suspension, but doing that will blow a tire. The performer must raise and lower his or her weight a little to help absorb the impacts.

Epilogue: Another Possible Beginning — The_End_is_Named…

When the comet arrived, the people who had evacuated outside had rushed indoors. That may not have been any help if the comet had hit, but that had ultimately saved Akikawa Mie and everyone else’s lives.

But the Magic Gods did not bother running away.

They calmly watched on without showing any concern about the sharp glass pouring down like rain or the massive shockwave approaching with enough force to knock over the roadside trees.

Niang-Niang looked up at it all.

“The High Priest was taken out.”

First Zombie and now the High Priest.

For Magic Gods who lived for so very long, this was two unbelievable events in quick succession. They had known a Magic God could be killed from the moment of Zombie’s death, but it was still difficult to accept what was happening before their eyes.

It was an issue of definitions.

Was a god really a being that could accept death?

“The High Priest was taken out! He was taken out!! What do we do, Nephthys!?”

They had called out to Kamijou Touma to make sure this did not happen.

That was supposed to be the job of the scorer who gave form to their formless peace of mind.

If Niang-Niang or Nephthys had restrained the High Priest with their full power, it would have become a battle between Magic Gods, so they had decided it would be best to use a safety measure that brought the possibility of no sacrifices.

But it had all gone up in smoke.

Not only that, it was not a Magic God or even Kamijou who had killed the High Priest.

"…"

A deluge of deafening noise reached them. All of the glass shards were reaching the ground. But none if it harmed the Magic Gods' skin. Nephthys did not budge as she lost herself in thought.

This was right.

This was what a Magic God was supposed to be.

Then what was that before them? What had led to that conclusion? Could they really let that happen?

Doubt reached her before deep sorrow could.

She lacked the pieces needed for the gears of emotion to turn properly.

"To hell with this."

While Nephthys thought, Niang-Niang did not seek an answer to every little thing.

"To hell with this, to hell with this, to hell with this!! I'm pissed now, completely pissed!! Basically, there's something in Academy City that can kill us, right? Then if we destroy that, everything will be back on track. That makes it easy, don't you think?"

"Niang-Niang?"

"*We just have to destroy Academy City*."

An ominous metallic sound rang out.

Something wriggled out from the baggy sleeves of Niang-Niang's China dress. They shot out. These were the sages' weapons that each had their own strange and special effect. Dozens of oddly shaped weapons stuck out like pens roughly shoved into a pen holder.

"*Wherever they're hiding, we can blow them away along with everything else if we level the entire city. So let's do that.*"

Nephthys gave a heavy sigh.

However, a Magic God was not going to scold her because indiscriminate slaughter was wrong.

"What about our sheath and scorer?"

"We can just wait a century or two and find another one. There's no real reason it has to be Kamijou Touma."

"True. Then I guess it can't be helped."

That was all it took for Nephthys to let go of Niang-Niang's reins. That also meant dooming a city of 2.3 million.

But this was not an issue of scale.

How many lives had been taken by the choices of a single emperor or pharaoh in ancient China or Egypt? And even those rulers feared the gods, so a city or two may not have meant much to them.

"If you're going to do it, do it quick," said Nephthys listlessly. "I didn't think Academy City was all that bad, so I might have second thoughts if you make me wait."

"Okay, okay. By the way, what about the others? Y'know, like Chimera-chan."

"They can withstand a single attack from another Magic God."

"All okaaaaaaaayyyyyyyyyyyyyyyyy!!"

Niang-Niang gave a shout toward the heavens.

The dozens…no, over one hundred sage weapons sticking from her sleeves all glowed and release the high-pitched sound of a metallophone.

In the end, did those two even have the normal emotion of sorrow toward their slain partner? They might have and they might not have.

There was no longer any way to check.

They would unleash their power on a whim and that was enough to smash an entire city to pieces.

And yet…

The destruction was easily stopped by a sound so light it seemed like a joke.

The sound came from two fingertips.

It came from *the index and middle finger of someone's right hand.*

They plunged into the center of Niang-Niang's flat chest and stabbed in up to the second joint.

"Ah? Eh?"

She looked utterly confused.

There was no pain. She could not tell why she had been stabbed. In fact, how had someone approached right in front of her without her noticing? And who were they anyway?

She did not have time to ask those questions.

True destruction awaited her.

At first, Nephthys thought Niang-Niang's pulse was escaping to the outside world, but that was not what it was.

(She's being absorbed?)

Nephthys tensed as she saw something unbelievable.

The fact that a Magic God was reacting like a frightened animal was enough for her to tremble.

(Niang-Niang is… A Magic God is being absorbed!?)

“No.”

Her frightening thoughts were cut off by a soft voice.

It was a common sort of kind voice found in any city. It belonged to a boy of a mid-sized build with brown hair. The great gap between what was happening and the person doing it just about short-circuited Nephthys’s mind.

“I am not absorbing her. Nor am I taking anything from her. I am simply giving her salvation. But only to the person who believes that this is salvation.”

“Sal…vation?”

She doubted her ears when she heard that unbelievable word.

She grew even more confused when she saw Niang-Niang’s face.

That Magic God girl had always been by her side.

Her expression was not one of fear, doubt, or confusion.

It was swollen with tranquility.

She was smiling.

“Heh…heh heh. It’ll finally be over. I’ll finally be freed. I…I…!! Nephthys, this is amazing! I…ahh…I’ve never felt so relieved!! Ah ha ha ha ha!!”

Something inside her was clearly absorbed, the size of her body visibly shrank, and she became nothing but the external skin. But that was what made it so strange. It was just like how certain wasps numbed their prey's nerves before feasting on them. The mismatch between the external phenomenon and the bliss in her mind released a joyful voice from the girl.

"A new world."

The brown-haired boy readily spoke while crushing Niang-Niang like a milk carton.

"My right hand is a collection of such dreams. I believe its name was…yes, World Rejecter."

"You can't. You can't possibly. Parallel worlds don't-…"

"Yes, the world is ultimately a straight line like the rubber string nailed onto pachinko machines. There is no infinite expanse of parallel worlds. But at the same time, the world is a rubber string. It can stretch or contract like time or space. The world we know has a surprising amount of waste. It's like using only ten frames when using sixty fps film. No one will notice if you stick some subliminal footage in using two or three of the leftover frames. This is what you wished for, isn't it? You Magic Gods wished for this even though you knew it could never come true. You checked the farthest reaches of the universe and all of the piled-up phases and you realized there was nothing new left. But if it was possible, you wished to leave behind this troublesome world *and spread your wings in a new world no one else knows of*."

Nephthys realized she could no longer hear Niang-Niang's voice.

In fact, her flat skin and China dress were gone too.

She had been absorbed and consumed before disappearing to some distant place.

"Oh? I had thought she was hiding the weapons up her sleeves, but it looks like she wasn't. So she was transforming her fingertips. Well, it is true the sages were incarnations of transcending the human body."

Nephthys knew this was very bad.

But not because of the boy's strange attack. Even after what she had seen and all the caution filling her, she still felt somewhat jealous, she wanted to try it herself, and she thought it looked interesting. Would the same fate await her if that absorption exceeded her own limits? No matter how much power she wielded, would she be robbed of any desire to resist and would she be helplessly "exiled"? Would she be like a bug drawn in by a bug zapper and fried? Would she be like a bug that slid into the acid after being drawn in by the sweet scent of a carnivorous plant?

That right hand controlled happiness.

She had been monitoring Imagine Breaker which was a reference point and recovery point for the world, but this was a completely different approach toward making a collection of the desires held by all magic-users.

One was an ideal that let them repair, fix, and cling to the current world.

The other was an illusion that let them abandon, leave, and throw out the current world.

But Nephthys did not did not know when the hope named World Rejecter had solidified in this world.

"What happened to Chimera?"

"I don't know."

"What about Tezcatlipoca, Nuada, and Proserpina!?"

"I don't know their names or what they look like."

"What happened to all the others!?"

“How would it have helped me to remember the exact number?”

That normal boy clenched and opened the right hand that had eliminated Niang-Niang.

Like a poor attempt at sleight of hand, something heavy fell down with a clunk.

It was a prosthetic left arm made of silver.

(Airgetlám…)

Nephthys was dumbfounded.

She knew the name of that god of Celtic mythology. She knew the legend of the one who had been forced to step down from the throne of the head god after losing an arm, but who had regained that throne after obtaining an artificial arm.

And…

She also knew how that silver arm was truly used and what the god who wielded it looked like.

“Anyway, I went around consuming everyone I saw who looked like a Magic God. The only ones I missed were…what were their names again? Zombie, High Priest, and…Othinus? Was that it? I don’t remember, so I can’t really say.”

Those were hopeless words.

Not to mention that he did not include Nephthys’s name on that list.

“Now, what to do about you?”

He truly was speaking on a whim.

Just having him turn his right palm her way was enough for unpleasant sweat to appear on Nephthys's chocolate skin. It was a mad sweat brought by a mixture of fear and joy.

"*Do you wish for a new world*?"

"!!!???"

She did not wait any longer.

She realized if she did, she would give in to the joy instead of the fear and she would give herself over to the temptation.

She released her power as a Magic God.

She was surrounded by the deafening sound of thousands of insect wings scraping together. In an instant, her brown silhouette blurred. Her divinity had been created based on the crying woman who was paid to take part in funerals. In this case in particular, that referred to the thousands or tens of thousands of servants who were buried alive in the pyramid for the pharaoh's burial.

That made Nephthys different from the other Magic Gods. The others had thoroughly honed their powers as an individual, but she had specialized her power as something that could be separated, split apart, cut away, and swapped out.

In other words, she held it in reserve.

Even after being hit by Aleister's weakening spell, she still had enough power to swap out the phase just once.

(Embed it.)

She bit her lip while aware she was at the disadvantage even as a god.

(Embed the phase, change the world, and use that power to crush-…)

The voice of her heart was cut off.

She heard a tremendous explosion of sound and her phase was crushed.

“Wha-?”

It was squeezed and crushed.

“…Ah…?”

To a third party, it may have looked like the entire scene wavered like a mirage, but this was something else entirely. That did not explain anything, but it was the only way of expressing it. Nephthys froze in place when she saw it and the boy simply clenched his right hand and opened it once more. It almost looked like he was giving her a greeting.

In other words, he could reject and kill even a Magic God using her full power.

And…

The normal boy tried to crack his neck, found he could not, frowned, and waved his right hand horizontally.

That was all he did.

Strength and distance meant nothing this time.

A handprint was torn from Nephthys’s ample chest.

“Ah.”

The Magic God looked down as if checking on her own body.

“Gh…bh. What…are…?”

The mediocre-looking boy did not allow it.

He swung his arm a second and third time as casually as brushing aside some spider webs in an abandoned building. Each time, more of Nephthys's body was taken away. No, it vanished to the "new world". She felt no pain or fear. She only sensed the possibilities of the unknown and her mind was filled with that hope and joy. Yes, she felt relief. That happiness was forced into her as if her skull had been opened and a thick syrup poured in, but she tried to fight it to the very, very end.

The right hand consumed her face.

The boy swung his right hand to eliminate even the few strands of silver hair fluttering away in the wind.

"I am Kamisato Kakeru."

The ordinary boy spoke in a completely ordinary manner.

"*I am the kind of normal high school boy you can find anywhere.*"

For a while, silence ruled all.

It was a form of perfection.

Not even the threat of a Magic God could stand up to it.

"Oh."

Then he scratched his head as if he had just remembered something.

"Oops. Don't Egyptian mummies have all the organs but their heart removed and preserved in containers? I guess I can't say I've consumed her just yet."

"Heh heh."

In St. George's Cathedral, Archbishop Laura Stuart laughed quietly.

The twist of her lips was far too wicked to call bewitching.

"You can build up a plan over a century, prepare massive funding and facilities, and put as much thought into it as you want. In the end, reality will easily bend those rails with a single outside element."

That information was forbidden to be recorded in any form.

It only existed in Laura's head.

"Now, then. World Rejecter has begun to move. Imagine Breaker was unable to contain the dreams of all magicians in its incomplete form, so what overflowed has gathered together to form another dream. What will you do, 'human'? It almost looks like you were born under a star that destined you to never obtain the things you wish for most."

She had known of that existence's arrival.

She had known of that normal high school boy's appearance.

"The peak of darkness doesn't suit you."

Laura laughed.

She laughed, ridiculed, and mocked.

"The title of 'cannibal' or 'the greatest eccentric of the 20th century' suit you so much better, Crowley."

The arrival of the next disaster was signaled with a doorbell.

Utterly exhausted and beaten-up, Kamijou Touma finally thought he had returned to his student dorm room that's windows were broken by the shockwave, but then an old delivery man delivered him a package.

He used his last ounce of strength to stamp his seal and collapsed to the floor with the box.

Who was it from?

He tried to peel away the fairly sturdy packaging tape with his fingernails, quickly gave up, and began to consider leaving it unopened.

Suddenly, the side of the box burst open and a brown leg slipped out.

“Wha-?”

This was clearly insane. The cardboard box was only thirty centimeters on each side, so not even a child would be able to hide inside. How had a beautiful young woman’s leg gotten inside?

Nevertheless, the bizarre scene continued.

Next came an arm, then another leg, and finally the whole box was torn to shreds. An entire silver-haired woman with chocolate skin burst out. The color of her eyes did not match and she had a teardrop tattoo below one eye. Also, her shapely body was only covered by white bandages.

He recognized her.

“Neph…thys?”

“Gh…kh. I was right to leave…just my primary organs behind.”

The Magic God seemed on the verge of coughing up blood and she just barely managed to rise to a crawling position.

She was trying to look Kamijou in the eye.

“Work with me. It won’t be a bad deal for you.”

“I’ve already said no to that stuff about your path, your sheath, and your scorer. I don’t need a wish or a prayer and I’m sick of being asked to be your peace of mind, your security software, or your protective charm!!”

“This is no time to be talking about that.”

Something seemed strange to Kamijou.

The Magic God was sweating an awful lot, so was she worn out? Even though she was a monster on the level of the High Priest who, even while weakened, had ridden back on a comet after being thrown out into space?

“World Rejecter has shown up.”

The answer to his confusion was far too incomplete.

However, the words still stabbed into his heart.

“If Kamisato Kakeru is ‘exiling’ all of the Magic Gods, then wouldn’t Othinus be in trouble too?”

“Pant, pant.”

Someone was out of breath.

It was a girl.

It was Misaka Mikoto.

The colors of evening had already changed to those of late night. She had somehow made her way back to Tokiwadai Middle School’s student dorm, where she arbitrarily deflected the questions of her roommate Shirai Kuroko who was concerned she had been hurt in the downpour of glass. She entered the bathroom, leaned her back against the door, and took deep breaths to restrain the chaos in her mind.

But it was no use.

It did not seem to work in the slightest.

For one, she could not keep up the deep breathing. She could only manage the shallow panting of a stray dog.

This was not caused by the abnormal strength of the Magic God known as the High Priest, by the scale of him coming back with the Arrowhead Comet after being ejected into space, by the single strike from the surface that had intercepted the falling object, or by the flash of light and shockwave that had covered the entire city.

This was something much closer to her.

And more importantly, something much further away.

(What…was that?)

At the very end, she had heard a sound from the boy who was leaning on her shoulder.

(What in the world was that?)

There should not have been anything they could have done.

There was no way she could have used her power as the #3 to intercept that one hundred meter comet approaching at max speed. That boy seemed to have something sleeping inside him that could endure even her power, but it should not have been able to do anything there.

It should not have been able to.

But in that final moment, the boy had held his palm up toward the comet as if to oppose it.

She had heard a sound like cracking plastic coming from his arm.

What if?

What if Academy City had done nothing and time had simply been allowed to pass? What would have happened then?

How would that boy’s right hand have changed and what would it have caused?

“He’s so…”

With her back still against the door, Mikoto looked down at her hands.

She had seen glimpses of it.

For example, that incident during the Daihaseisai. For example, the driving force that led him to face the source of World War Three all alone. For example, for example, for example, for example.

But…

Her power, her value, and her existence had been entirely rejected by the High Priest and then later reaffirmed by Kamijou Touma.

She thought about all of that.

Her heart had been repeatedly torn into. She would not have been able to stand up had she been alone. She had only been able to return to her dorm room and she had only been able to remain Tokiwadai’s Ace and Academy City’s #3 because of that boy.

But at the same time, something had ripped her heart apart and left deep claw marks there.

Finally, she covered her face with her hands, bit her hidden lips, and forced out a suppressed yet definite voice.

“He’s so far away!!!!!”

Afterword

If you bought each volume one by one, welcome back. If you bought them all at once, welcome.

This is Kamachi Kazuma.

Instead of someone tricky like St. Germain, this was a direct battle with the High Priest, a true Magic God. It doesn't matter if he's weakened and brought down to a trillionth of his power. I wrote the manuscript while aiming for a battle that overwhelms Kamijou from beginning to end.

I also explained why the Magic Gods of the true Gremlin were focused on Kamijou and what their goal was. In New Testament Volume 12, St. Germain said the Magic Gods envied Othinus, but that answer was fully revealed this time.

If a magician is created to grant some wish, then a Magic God is what remains after the wish is granted.

If their Magic Name were entirely fulfilled, what would remain for them?

I moved this story along while thinking about that.

Also, Misaka Mikoto was an important part of this story.

She's been with us since the very first volume, a lot of information has been presented along the way, and she has accumulated a number of emotions. Sometimes she is becoming aware of her romantic feelings, sometimes she is feeling the shock of being pushed away, and in New Testament 10, she gave Kamijou a pat on the back to see him on his way. But "right now", what is she thinking, what is she worrying about, and what is she trying to overcome? My answer to that is Misaka Mikoto's troubles here in New Testament 13.

How far can the title of Academy City's #3 take her?

Has she perhaps fallen behind?

When words like magician and even Magic God are being used like normal, wouldn't she feel the fear of possibly being left behind and not being able to walk alongside the person she longs for (and had thought she was courageously seeing on his way)?

And now that the hurdle had been set up, how will she overcome it? There are a number of options there. She could make sure Kamijou can do his best by giving him an everyday life to return to. She could decide everyone has fields they excel in and therefore support him only in the areas where her skills lie.

But given Mikoto's nature, I want her to keep at it from head on. I want her to keep running after Kamijou's back no matter how hopeless or reckless it seems.

It was those feelings that guided the direction of the story here. How did you like it?

I give my thanks to my illustrator Haimura-san and to my editors Miki-san, Onodera-san, and Anana-san. The key to this one was to see how much of a monster we could make the High Priest, so that probably put an even larger portion of the burden on the illustrations than usual. Thank you so much for sticking with me even when I made you go to all that effort.

I also give my thanks to the readers. I think a battle with a Magic God is less about a comparison of strength and more about seeing how insane they are, but what did you think? I'll be glad as long as you felt like you really didn't want to fight someone like that.

It is time to close the pages for now while praying that the pages of the next book will be opened.

And I lay my pen down for now

Raise your hand if you thought the fight against the Magic Gods would continue a lot longer than this!

-Kamachi Kazuma